

India in Arabic Literature: A Legend to the Eternal Bond

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Abstract

In the history of world civilization, India has an influential position that spans thousands of years. It contributes significantly to India through its progress in various fields of knowledge available in India. That is why many outsiders became attracted with its riches. History witnesses that people of many non-Indian and world languages and literatures worked on India and its people and so on. Likewise, Arabic as a rich and living language, played a prominent role in sharing and working about India and its figures and wisdom, further, the Arab scholars mention India as a land of love, wisdom, philosophers, sages, etc. from that of the pre-Islamic period to the modern. In the Abbasid era, the educational and cultural development touched the height where it is found many Arab writers visited India for acquiring knowledge and collecting information from India which are clearly discussed in their various writings and memoirs. This article will examine what is the position of India in the eyes of the Arab scholars and how far India becomes successful and rich in the history and rich in the history of interaction with the Arabic language and literature.

Various studies have been done on the general studies relating to India through Arabic language and literature; but no study, so far my knowledge goes, has been undertaken or analyzed so deeply on the aforesaid topic with establishing it as a legend to the long time relation between the two regions as well. So the topic selected for study as 'India in Arabic Literature : A legend to the Eternal Bond'.

Keywords: Poetry, Abbasid, psychological, Indian sciences, Al-Fihrist, Tuhfat al-Nuzzar, Al-Beruni.

Introduction:

The Arab and the Arab scholars are found to have good knowledge about India since ancient period. The Arabic served as a language of administration and scholastic approach in India for about two centuries. India has a rich relation with Arab countries throughout the centuries also. The Arabs also have been studying India and its people, wealth, etc. The scholars of various Arab regions contributed a lot in their works about India. They visited India and learnt a lot of knowledge already available in India, specially regarding various sciences like mathematics, astronomy, Ayurveda, philosophy, etc. They also collected information about India and its various riches. They mentioned all these things in their writings and commented India as a land of wisdom, love and so on. In the Abbasid era, the Bait al-Hikma (House of Wisdom) played an important role in translating Indian works on various fields of knowledge. And specially, the great Indian text book of vivid stories was also translated into Arabic. This heritage should continue to work in establishing cultural, educational relations between the two countries.

Objectives

The main objective of this paper is to discuss and analyze how far the scholars of Arabic language and literature deserve in their writings the credit of championship for endeavoring to establish an exemplary way to the study about India and various fields of its wisdom.

Material resources and Methodology

Both the primary and secondary sources of data available in Arabic, English and Urdu languages will be consulted for the study of this topic. As to follow up the methodology to this article, both descriptive and historical analysis research design will be accepted.

Results and Discussion

India is known to the Arabs, since time immemorial, as a land of philosophers and astronomers, the cradle of great epic and wisdom, a motherland of sages and sculptures. Some historians opine, 'The ancient Egyptians used to wrap the dead bodies using a cloth which had the design and fabric of Indian origin.' The words like 'Indian Sword', are also found in the pre-Islamic poetry. The famous Arab poets of 6th and 7th century AD used it as a mark of true metaphor in their famous poems. Imraul-Qais, Al-Nabigha, and Al-A'sha frequently used these word in their poems. Al-A'sha says that wherever a poet at that time wanted to describe a sharp sword, he would describe it as Indian sword.

Arabic literature is found to replete with images depicting the various aspects of animal life in India. India had a prominent position in the Arab writings from ancient to modern times. We can say that these writings have dealt with everything significant about India, descriptions of its states and cities, geographical settings – river, hills, ports – even its fauna and flora. Many Sanskrit books and writings on the Indian philosophy and wisdom are found studied in Arabic literature and also translated into Arabic. It is quite known that the book of Indian wisdom 'Panchatantra' is the origin of Qalila wa Dimna which was translated from Persian by Abdulla Ibn al-Muqaffa'a in 757 AD.

The cultural, educational and economic relations between the Arabs and the Indians have greatly developed over centuries. During the Abbasid period through translation of Indian books, the Arabs came to know the important subjects; like medicine, astronomy and philosophy. Ibn Nadeem states in his book, Al-Fihrist (The Index) that the Abbasid minister Yahya bin Khalid Barmaki was the first one to be interested in Indian sciences. Therefore, he sent a delegation to India to bring spices and collect information on Indian religions. The head of the delegation on his return prepared a report on his experience compiling a book in Arabic language. Moreover, Ibn Nadim detailed 51 books translated into Arabic of Indian origin. These also include "The Book on Poison", and other books on Gynecology in addition to many other books on different kinds of snakes and snake poisons and the drugs to be used. Many other books were also there in this regard dealing with various diseases including hysteria and psychological disorders.

At a later stage, the Arab World came to know the religious books in India. The writings of Chanakya as well as other Sanskrit works ranging from logic and magic were also translated into Arabic. A part of the epic Mahabharata was translated in 11th century AD.

In the middle ages, a great Arab scholar, Abu-Rayhan Muhammad Bin Ahmad Al-Beruni (973– 1050 AD) had visited India in the first decades of the 11th century to study the Indian sciences. He authored the richest and most comprehensive book in Arabic on India, Kitab al-Hind. This book comprises various

chapters which throw the light on India's religions, literature, geography and history as well as astrology, astronomy and the Indian traditions and law.

The period Al-Beruni spent in India contributed to increasing his knowledge and astrology. On his return from India, he started to teach the original methods of astrological calculations to his peers who were so interested in this subject that they requested him to provide them with the names of the scholars who taught him this knowledge in India.

Having mastered in Sanskrit language, Al-Beruni started to translate many books in Arabic including a book by Kapil and two books by Brahma Gupta. He also translated into Sanskrit language Euclides's book. In addition to this, Al-Beruni wrote a paper on the old instrument used for measuring the distance of the Sun and the Stars. The renowned German scholar, Eduard Sachau has detailed many works of Al-Beruni which dealt with Indian subjects such as astrology, mathematics, medicine and other. Moreover, Sachau has translated two important works of al-Beruni: Al-Athar and Kitab al-Hind in 1878 and 1887 respectively where the relevance of India deliberately came.

Motivated by his love and admiration for the Indian wisdom, Al-Beruni criticized his contemporary Indians for not opening to the world as much as they were opened to their ancestors and he advised them to make many travels and journeys by which to complete the march of their ancestors.

Al-Beruni was not the only Arab scientist to be interested in Indian sciences and to derive much knowledge from them; there was also the famous Arab voyageur Ibn-Battuta (1304-1368 AD) who had covered in his 28-year journey 75,000 miles. Ibn-Battuta visited India during the rule of Mohammed Ibn Tughlaq (1325-1351 AD) and dedicated 100 pages to India in his book Tuhfat al-Nozzar. From the Rajput kingdom of Sarsatti, Ibn-Battuta visited Hansi in India and articulated it as one of the most beautiful, best constructed and most populated cities in Indian subcontinent, which was surrounded with a strong wall. Further, upon his arrival in Sind, he mentioned the Indian rhinoceros that lived in the banks of Indus.

Out of great respect for Ibn-Battuta, the Indian King appointed him the Judge of Delhi. He occupied this post for some time till the king sent him as the head of a delegation to China. Due to unavoidable circumstances, Ibn-Battuta could not reach China at that time, but he later visited it on his own.

Ibn Battuta vividly describes Delhi in his book as marvelous city with extremely beautiful buildings, not matched by any other city in the world. He considers Delhi not only as the largest city in India but in the Islamic world at large. Ibn-Battuta says Delhi comprises four neighboring towns, the first is old Delhi which was built prior to the Islamic rule; the other town is Tughlaqabad city named after its founder Tughlaq.

Ibn-Battuta goes on describing India by dedicating a part of Indian customs and traditions at that time. He elaborates his description of the lotus saying, "The Indians attach great respect to this plant. Whenever an Indian visits a friend and he offers him five leaves of this plant, he feels as if he were offered the whole world. To the Indians such a present indicates great respect and is more precious than gold and silver." Ibn Battuta had come to know the Indian customs and traditions so closely that he was able to distinguish the religious and cultural background of any Indian he saw from his external appearance, which was related to a great extent to one's customs and traditions. Once he says, "Grasping the Indian traditions makes it quite easy to distinguish between a Moslem and non-Moslem woman. Whereas a non-Moslem woman pricks her ears, a Moslem woman never does that." One of the Indian traditions that attracted Ibn-Battuta attention which he mentioned repeatedly in his book was burning a woman alive on her husband's

pyre after her husband dies. Ibn Battuta also describes how Mohammed Ibn Tughlaq had shifted his capital from the city of Delhi to revamp and rehabilitate it to the other place.

Ibn-Battuta shows a great respect to the King of India for his hospitality and generosity to his guests and also for his standing for the principles of justice in dealing with his people. He quotes many examples as a proof to this fact. Once Sind went through a severe draught, and prices soared high in an unprecedented way, he issued the orders to meet the needs of the people from the coffers of the state for 6 months.

India's nature and its components, like trees, flowers and fruits, etc, had an ample share of description and comments in Ibn-Battuta's book which is full of vivid depiction of the places he visited during his visit to the country.

One of the writers who was extremely fond of the Indian knowledge was a great Abbasid writer, Al-Jahez who praised the Indian philosophers in his book *Al-Bayan wa al-Tibyan*. He described the Indians as a people of great knowledge, bravery and valour; saying, "India is the source of knowledge, teaching and insight". Another Arab historian, geographer and traveler Al-Mas'udi (896 – 956 AD), sometimes referred to as the 'Herodotus of the Arabs', placed the Indian people among the greatest seven stocks in the world after his visit in Sind, Gujarat and Maharashtra. In the same way, many other great writers have also mentioned and wrote about India in their writings regarding various aspects of studies. These include Abu Abdulla Muhammad Al-Idrisi (1100 – 1165 AD) who was a geographer and a cartographer of world fame and created a map in Arabic about India in 1154 AD featuring the Indian subcontinent as part of a larger world map. Muhammad Ibn Al-Faqih al-Hamadhani (fl. 902), a tenth century historian and geographer of Persian origin, mentioned Indian commodities and Indian Ocean in his famous Arabic book *Mukhtasar Kitab al-Buldan* (Concise Book of Countries). Zakariya al-Qazwini (1203 – 1283 AD), a cosmographer and a geographer, has also mentioned in his famous book '*Ajaib al-Makhloqat*' (Wonders of Creations) the Indian contents concerned. The book was widely reproduced with illustrations in India and also became popular during 16th century.

India and its people were always been touched with Arabic literature throughout the centuries, particularly during the Abbasid era, which witnessed a deep relation between Arab and Indian civilizations as well. It seems pertinent to mention here that India's wisdom and its rich treasures are available in both the old Arabic literature and writings and in the modern Arabic literature. Modern India with its symbols and great figures are present more than ever in modern Arabic literature either political or social. Perhaps Tagore, Nehru, Gandhi and Indira had the greatest share in the Arabic literature as a poet, painter, a philosopher or a sage, but also as the epitome of eternal intellect which does not die with the mortal death. Most of Tagore's innovations in poetry and theatre, etc. were translated into Arabic and they were studied and analyzed deeply by the Arab intellectuals especially the Egyptians. To quote only a few examples we can say about that Badie Haqqi has translated "Tagore's volume" (Beirut, 1955), "The Reaping of the Fruits", as well as "The Spring" (Damascus, 1965). Mohammad Badr Uddin Khalil, Mohammad Tahir al-Zabalawi, Khalil Girgis Khalil and Wadie al-Bustani also translated anthologies of his works. Mohammaad Mahdi Alam, Abdur Rahman Sidqi, Shirki Ayad have studied and analyzed Tagore's works in their writings. Moreover, a good number of Indian writers are there who either worked in Arabic on the Indian Arabic figures or translated their works into Arabic with the help of which the Arabs came to know

about India and Indians at large. In this regard, the role of various journals and magazines published from India and Arab countries is very prominent.

It is also found that one of the innovators in translating the Indian classics in Arabic was the Lebanese poet, Wadie al-Bustani who translated some of the Gita. He also translated some texts from the epic Ramayana and the style he applied in it was eloquent, vigorous and smooth.

In his encyclopedic book “Around the World in 200 Days”, the Egyptian writer Anis Mansur dedicated 154 pages in articulating India and its details in a very interesting manner.

We also find that in the heydays of independence struggle, the Arab writers paid considerable attention in their works to the Indian leader and he is Mahatma Gandhi. He was presented as a symbol of tolerance, love and peace. Hundreds of articles were dedicated by the Arab writers on Gandhi’s life and his political struggle. Ahmed Shawqi, “Ameer al-Shu’ara” (‘The Prince of the Poets), had composed an eloquent poem during Gandhi’s transit visit through Egypt in 1931 on his way to attend the Round Table Conference in London where he compared Gandhi to the prophet in defending the rights of the victimized people and also his asceticism.

Further, Anis Mansur states that Nehru was termed in the Arabic literature as the messenger of peace. His most important works, “The Discovery of India” (1946) and “Letters from a Father to His Daughter” (1929), were translated by Ahmed Baha Uddin in Arabic and many Arab scholars have studied and analyzed the book as a great literary work. The personality of Indira Gandhi was also the focus of interest of many Arab writers. She had a prominent place in the writings of many writers such as Abbas Mahmud al-Aqqad and Mustafa Amin.

Conclusion

To conclude it can be said that India has the deep relationship with Arab countries due its rich treasure of wisdom and its dissemination through the advancement of transaction of languages of both the regions. The Arabs contributed a lot of India and its properties in Arabic language and literature; and similarly a good number of Indian writers also played a vital role in propagating the various kinds of wisdom of their own land in Arabic. So this tradition can be upgraded to a higher grade if it is continued to progress through all possible ways duly initiated and undertaken by the two regions concerned.

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