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Contribution of Arab Muslims of Middle Ages in Geography

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Abstract : Knowledge is very important in Islam, without it the wheel of Islam can't turn, that is why Islam emphasized the acquisition of very knowledge that can help a person to progress in the world, and live a life of dignity, following its teaching, the scholars of medieval period collected every knowledge from every corner of the globe and offered their sacrifice in its propagation and paved the way for future generations by writing countless books of which services of the scholars in the field of geography are very important. So, the geographers like Muhammad Bin Musa al-Khawarizmi, Abu Abdullah Muhammad bin Abu Bakar Al-Maqdesi, Abu Raihan Al-Biruni, Abu Obaid Abdullah bin Abdul Aziz Al-Bikri, Abu Abdullah Muhammad Al-Idrisi, Abu Abdullah Yaqut Mahawi, Abul Fida, Ibn-e-Zubair, Al-Mazni, Ibn-e-Mujabir, Al-Nabati, Al-Abdari, Al-Tibi, Al-Tizani and others advanced the geography so much that the honest and just European Scholars openly confessed the deeds of the Muslim geographers. The present paper is attempted to highlight the some glorious contribution of Muslim geographers of Medieval Period.

Keyword: Arab map, Arab Geographers, Books of Geography, Merchants, Sailors, European Scholars, Travelers, Abbasid Period, Middle-age.

Introduction: At first the knowledge of Geography originated as a science in Egypt and Greece. Some of the writings of ancient geographers are very interesting. Aristotle believed that air from the atmosphere enters the earth and gets trapped and when it tries to get back into the atmosphere an earthquake occurs. But along with these strange ideas, the ancient Greeks made some amazing discoveries for the example about two hundred years before Christ, Aristotle announced in find the ratio of the tidal waves in the east and the west of Egypt that the Atlantic and Indian Oceans became interconnected. His another discovery is noteworthy, according to which he said that there must be a country in the far west from north to south. So, seventeen hundred years later, Columbus discovered America. However, the Greeks were the first to make progress in geography, then in the Middle Ages many Muslim scientists were born, and they paved the way for future generation by writing countless books in this regard, and they discovered such thing which benefited the world. Among the important names of this period the names of Ibn-e-Batuta, Ibn-e-Khaldun and Idrisi are noteworthy. Then after the fall of the Muslims much works had been done on this subject in Europe and it is still going on.

Significance : During the Abbasid period (750-1258CE) the Arabs did a lot of contribution in the field of geography. The Muslim of this era invented many things and wrote many valuable books in this regard. This study will help new generation of Arabs. So, that they may learn from illustrious deeds of their forefathers and be ready to offer their sacrifices in this field.

Objectives:

- 1) The paper aims to highlight the contribution of Arab scholars of Middle age in propagation of geography.
- 2) It has been attempted to remind the Arab new generation regarding contribution of their forefathers in the field of geography.
- 3) It aims to highlight that the wheel of nature always turning, it is its job to give and take from someone.
- 4) It has been attempted to remind the Muslims of the world that the service of geography is the service of Islam, because it fulfills the needs of human beings.

Data Collection: The study based on secondary data, the data has been collected from secondary sources, like books, journals and websites for conducting the study.

Scope of the study: This study is restricted to Arab world of middle age only.

Interpretation : The worship and reciprocal exchange these two elements have a special role to play in the propagation of geography of Arab Muslims. Such as knowledge of ways for Hajj, Knowledge of times for performing prayers, determining the direction of Qibla for construction of the Mosques, and need of geographical location of different countries and cities for government works etc. All these elements compelled the Arab Muslims to gain knowledge of geography.

When the translating works of Iranian, Indian and Greek books into Arabic began in Abbasid period, then "Sabit bin Qurrah" (836-901CE) translated a famous book of Greek philosopher Ptolemy named "Geographical Treatise" and other books of the Greek Philosopher Aristotle were also translated into Arabic. Moreover the Arab Muslims became able to write about geography after gaining the knowledge of geographical elements from Indian and Iran.

During the reign of Abbasid Caliph Mamun Al-Rashid (813-833CE) Muhammad bin Musa Khawarizmi (d-846CE) wrote a book in this regard named "Surat-ul-Ardh" and made a valuable map with seventy companions. ⁽¹⁾

Abu Abdullah Muhammad bin Abu Bakar Al-Maqdesi (d-1000CE) became famous person for writing a book in this regard named "Ahsan-ut-Taqasim-fi-Marifat-il-Aqaleem". He was able to write this book using his thirty years of experience traveling all over the Muslim world except Spain. So will Durant said "*Mahammad al-Muqqaa-desi visited all the lands of Islam except Spain, suffered countless vicissitudes and in 985 wrote his Description of the Mosslem Empire the greatest work of Arabic geography before al-Biruni's India*". ⁽²⁾

Abu Raihan Al-Biruni wrote a valuable book named "Kitab-u-Tareekh-il-Hind". He described in this book such valuable geographical elements that have never been found before.

The famous Spanish linguist and geographer Abu Obaid Abdullah bin Abdul Aziz Al-Bikri (d-1094CE) has written a valuable dictionary on geography named "Mu'Jam-u-Mastajma'-min-asma-il-Bilad-i-wal-Mawazi" the book contains the names of different cities and places. He wrote another valuable book in this regard named "Kitab-ul-Masalik-wal-mamalik". ⁽³⁾

Abu Abdullah Muhammad Al-Idrisi (d-1165CE) was an Arab Muslim living in Spain. He was well known for his geography. He wrote a valuable book named "Nuzhat-ul-Mushtaque-fi-Ikhtirayil Aafaq". The book was considered to be the latest and most important book in European educational institutions for three hundred years. So P.K.Hitti said "*In this critical collation of the material al-Idrisi shows a remarkable breadth of view and a grasp of such essential facts as the sphericity of the earth*" ⁽⁴⁾ the writers of Encyclopedia Britanika said "Al-

Idrisi constructed a world map in 1154 CE for the Christian king Roger of Sicily, showing better information of Asian areas, that had been available there.⁽⁵⁾

P. K. Hitti said *“The best known geographer of the eleventh century was al-Bikri, a Hispano-Arab, and the most brilliant geographer and cartographer of twelfth century, indeed of all medieval time, was Al-Idrisi a descendant of royal Spanish Arab family who got his education in Spain”.*⁽⁶⁾

Abu Abdullah Yakut Mahavi was a famous geographer in Baghdad, he wrote a book in this regard named *“Mu’Jam-ul-Buldan”* P. K. Hitti was so pleased to read the book that he called Mahavi the greatest geographer of all time as he said *“This Mu’jam in which names of places are alphabetically arranged is a veritable encyclopaedia containing in addition to the whole fund of geographical knowledge of the age, valuable information on history, ethnography and natural science”.*⁽⁷⁾ Will Durant said while praising Mahavi’s book *“While buttering the bread of poverty as a Copyist, he completed his Mu’jam al-Buldan (1228) a vast geographical encyclopedia which summed up nearly all medieval knowledge of the globe. Yaqut included almost everything astronomy, physics, archeology, history, giving the co-ordinates of the cities and the lives and works of their famous men, seldom has anyman so loved the earth”.*⁽⁸⁾

After Idrisi and Mahawi, Abul Fida was the one who gained the most fame in this field. He wrote a famous book in 1331 CE named *“Taqweem-ul-Buldan”* besides them there were some other famous geographers, like Zakaria-bin-Muhammad-Al-Qazwini (1203-1283CE) Abu Abdullah Muhammad al-Demashqi (d-1227CE) Ibn-ul-wardi (d-1457 CE) and others. But the fact is that the rise of Muslim geographical works have come to an end by Idrisi and Mahawi, and the matter of the book written by Abul Fida named *“Taqweem-ul-Buldan”* in the field of geography is like a blaze before the lamp goes out.

There is no way without telling the travelogue of the Arab Muslims about geography. There are more than ten travelogue of Arab Muslims, which have the great geographical importance, because the geographical location of most of the areas of that era has been described in them. The travelogue of Ibn-e-Zubair (d-1270 CE) named *“Al-Rahla”* and the travelogue of Ibn-e-Batuta named *Tuhfat-un-Nazar-fi-gara-ib-il-ansar-wa-Aja-ib-il-Amsar* have gained world fame. Moreover, travelogue of Al-Mazni (d-1169CE) Ibn-e-Mujabir (d-1230CE), At-Nabati (d-1239CE), Al-Abdari (d-1289CE) Al-Tibi (d-1299CE) Al-Tizani (d-1308CE) are very famous.⁽⁹⁾

The contribution of Arab Muslim merchants in the propagation of geographical knowledge was no less. People before Marco polo had little knowledge about China. After Marco Polo, who visited China in 13th Century, European could learn about China. But according to Will Durant the Arab Muslim travelled to China 425 years before Marco Polo in 840 CE. And Arab Muslim merchant named Sulaiman Tazir traveled a long way east.⁽¹⁰⁾ The thoughts of Sulaiman on China were written in 850CE by a writer in his article named *“Akhbar-us-seen-wal-Hind”*.

The travelogue of sulaiman has made it possible to gain a detailed knowledge of the coastal areas of India. It is the oldest writing in this regard in the world. Then by the book named *Nubz-un-fi-Akhbar-is-seen wal Hind* written by Al-Biruni, the people of the world would know that the Chinese people in that era did not know how to sign and they used to give fingerprints instead of signature. Detailed knowledge about Russia was made possible by the Arab Muslim merchant, Ahmad Failan ibn-e-Ahmad who was sent by the Abbasid Caliph Muktadir Billah to the King of Bulgaria in (908-932CE).⁽¹¹⁾

Arab Muslim geographers themselves travelled and gathered knowledge about geography. They travelled to different countries and regions and made new discoveries about life, cultivation, character and business etc of the people living there.⁽¹²⁾

Apart from merchants and travelers, the role of Muslim sailors in the propagation of geography was no less. Masudi and Muqaddisi described some sailors in their books. Muqaddisi wanted to know a picture of the Indian Ocean from a sailor. ⁽¹³⁾

The most important person in the history of Muslim sailors is shihabuddin Ahmad Ibn-e-Majid. He was called Asadul Bahar (Sea lion). Ibn-e-Majid spent more than half a century at sea, and wrote thirty eight books of astronomy and the ocean, of which the book named "Al-Fawa'id-fi-usul-il-ilm-il-Bahar-i-wal-Qawa'id" is very valuable. Ibn-e-Majid was considered to be one of the most famous scientists because of his mastery of the sea. ⁽¹⁴⁾

Sulaiman bin Ahmad Al-Mahri was the most important sailor in the history of Muslim sailors after Ibn-e-Majid. He wrote five books about the sea, of which his two books named "Al-umdatul-Mahdiyyah-fi-zabt-il-Ullom-il-Bahriyyah" and "Tuhfat-ul-Fuhul-fit-Tamheed-il-usool" are very famous. ⁽¹⁵⁾

In the age of Mamunur Rashid, in the ninth century the idea of globe becoming round became clear to the Muslim scientists. So, the famous scholar John William Draper said "*Thus when Al-mamun, having become acquainted, with the globular form of earth gave orders to his mathematicians and astronomers to measure a degree of great circle upon it*". ⁽¹⁶⁾

The idea of the earth being round was forbidden among Europeans. In the 15th century, Christian religious leaders were outraged to hear that the earth was round. Where the Arab Muslims became aware of it 600 years ago. ⁽¹⁷⁾

On 9th July, 1497 CE Vasco-da-Gama set out on an expedition with 170 people on three ships, some of them were Arabic knowing. They also had an Arab map at the time of the expedition. So, Draper said "*Vascoda Gama set sail July 9, 1497 with three ships having with him the Arab map*". ⁽¹⁸⁾

The Muslim geographers did a great deal of service to the science of Geography by focusing on the importance of the map. They made the maps with great care and thought.

So, J.H.Kramers said "*The map certainly show a more exact notion of geographical reality than those which circulated at the same time in Europe, founded chiefly on the world map of the Spanish monk beatus*". ⁽¹⁹⁾

J. H. Kramers said again "*But no period shows so clearly the once enormous superiority of the Islamic peoples over the Christian world as the tenth century, when Islam was at the summit of its prosperity and Christian Europe had come to a seemingly hopeless stand still*". ⁽²⁰⁾

The author of the Encyclopaedia Britannica compares the geographical knowledge of medieval Muslim and Christians "*During the long years of internal dissention and external attack that followed the breakup of Roman empire in the West, scholars congregating in remote places looked inward not outward; they studied Bible not the world so that geographers become henchmen of the theologians. The maps they produced were not attempts to portray reality but in modern parlance were illustrating theological concepts. In these centuries, Muslims, not the Christians were the scientists*". ⁽²¹⁾

Conclusion:

The holy Quran encouraged the people to reflect and research on many things of the universe. On the other hand Muhammad also encouraged the people to do so. Therefore, inspired by the verses of the Holy Quran and commandment of Muhammad, many scholars were born among the Muslim and they did the best in the field of every knowledge, of which the geography is very important, because the geography helps us understand the planets movement. It helps us investigate and think critically and creatively about the complexities of places and different views and feelings relating to places. It also determines people's life styles, as they adapt to the available food and climate patterns; it influences the development of the people who occupy given areas. It is the single most important factor that decides if a civilization will prosper and survive throughout centuries. It helps us to plan for uncertain future based on our knowledge of past and current conditions. It helps us understand basic physical systems that affect everyday life. In view of the immense usefulness and importance of geography, we should offer our sacrifice in disseminating this knowledge, because the services of our forefathers alone are not enough for us.

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