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Arabic Language: Characteristics and Importance

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ABSTRACT

Today, Arabic has been one of the richest languages of the world. In the middle ages, it was the leading language of the world and occupied an international position similar to that of English at the present time. Significantly enough that it has left much influence over the languages of Europe, especially, in chemical and astronomical terms. Similarly, in linguistic field, it is to be noted that many Indian languages had developed under the tutelage of Arabic. In addition, it is the holy language of Islam and as such, it has been studied in the four corners of the world as a language of a great religion and civilization. Due to an elaborate system of grammar, words possessing various meaning, numerous synonyms and rich vocabulary, Arabic has been a complicated language. But at the same time, it has provided immense scopes for expressing thoughts in different ways. The study of the Arabic language should not become the monopoly of some people or of one section of the Indian people, but should be studied by all those who are interested in gaining a better knowledge of the social, economic or political conditions of the Arab world today, or want to study its glorious past history and philosophy, or desirous of availing the better placement facility in the Arab world.

ARABIC LANGUAGE: CHARACTERISTICS AND IMPORTANCE

Broadly speaking, language is a means of communication. It is through this means that the interaction between human beings takes place. M. Schlauch regards it as “a fundamental means of preserving, transmuted and continuously enriching achievements of human culture”. In reality, through language we can come to know about the progressive status of a society from its primitive stage to a developed one.

Arabic is the most developed Semitic language today and it is one of the major languages of the world. Although the Arabic language existed long before the emergence of Islam, Islam has had a profound impact on its development. As a cosmopolitan religion, Islam carried Arabic to all peoples who took

shelter under the shadow of Islam. In the middle ages, it was the leading language of the world and occupied an international position similar to that of English at the present time. Muslim scholars of non-Arab origin such as the astronomer and encyclopedic scientist al-Biruni (d.1048), the philosopher and physician Ibn Sina (d.1037), the historian and theologian al-Tabari (d.923), and many others produced their famous works in Arabic. Despite its long history and great geographical spread, Arabic has retained its originality and salient features. It continues to adapt to modernity and to retain its flexibility and adaptability to cope with the pace of change, especially, in areas of complex societal organization

and in specialized scientific and technological disciplines. It contains rich cultural inheritance apart from its excellent ability for expressing the human thoughts in a lucid style. Presently, Arabic is enjoying the status of official language of the 21 countries and a major language in various parts of the world. Above all, it is the holy language of worship for Muslims and as such it has been studied in the four corners of the globe as a language of a great religion and civilization.

As a Semitic language, Arabic possesses some peculiar and unique characteristics like: (a) It is written from right to left. (b) There are three numbers – singular, dual and plural; and two genders – masculine and feminine. (c) In Arabic, words generally are formed from roots, and most of the root words are triconsonantal. (d) In this language, nouns and adjectives possess genders. (e) The masculine nouns accept feminine numerals and vice versa. (f) In the verbal tenses the complete action is indicated by a suffix, and the incomplete action is denoted by a prefix. In Arabic, for example, ‘katabat’ means she wrote but ‘taktubu’ means she writes. (g) The feminine suffix ‘ta’ is used as grammatical gender in common. (h) The general order of words in a sentence is, first comes the verb, then the subject, and lastly the object for predicate. (i) Richness of vocabulary is also another striking feature of Arabic language. For instance, it has 52 synonyms for darkness, 34 for the rain, 16 for the moon, 21 for the light, 164 for short, 91 for long and 50 for the cloud.

The present Arabic has developed out of its two forms. (1) the South Arabic and (2) the North Arabic. Differences in grammar, vocabulary and script are found in these two forms. South Arabic is known today only through inscriptions and North Arabic is known as Arabic language. Hitti observes that about 4,000 inscriptions related to South Arabic language are found at present. Through these inscriptions it has come to light that South Arabic had twenty nine

letters of alphabet. This shows the richness and the standard of progress of the Arabic language in its early stage. But as a result of the decay of Yemenite culture, South Arabic disappeared and North Arabic occupied its place.

It is worth mentioning that the Arabic alphabet, next to Latin, is the most widely used system in the world. Urdu, Persian, Afghan, Malayan and a number of Turkish languages have adopted it. The European languages were influenced to a considerable extent by this language, particularly, in various chemical and astronomical terms like alcohol, elixir, azimuth etc. Likewise, many Indian languages had developed under the tutelage of Arabic. They have borrowed a good number of Arabic vocabulary along with some other linguistic elements. Mention of some purely Arabic rooted words, which have been used in Assamese as well as Bengali languages, may be made here in this respect like bayaan (description), maal (wealth), insaaf (justice), kitaab (book), haadir (present), Qalam (pen), Haakim (judge), khabar (massage), qissah (story), inshaarah (indication), maidaan (field), zaalim (oppressor), badal (exchange), wazan (weight) etc. but it is to be remarked that these words are wrongly pronounced in these languages. For example, haadir (present) is pronounced as hajir, ustaadh (teacher) as ustad, taalibu’ilm (seeker of knowledge) as talbilim, aql (intelligence) as akkel, nuqsan (loss) as loksan, mu’min as momin and so on.

Like all other developed languages, Arabic, too, borrowed numerous foreign terms and expressions in order to make its linguistics treasure rich and capable to cope with the pace of change. For example, many words of Indian origin like narjil (coconut), musk (scent), tambol (betel-nut) etc. entered into the Arabic vocabulary. Similarly, in modern standard Arabic one may find words like barlamaan (parliament), tilfuun (telephone), tilfiziyuun (television) etc, which are directly borrowed from western languages and are assimilated into Arabic.

With common usage, a good number of verbs have been derived from some of the newly Arabicized words such as talfana (to telephone) and talfaza (to televise). We further find participles like mutulfaz (televised) and substantives like tilfaz (television set). This sort of Arabicized vocabulary have been commonly made to agree with the rules of Arabic morphology and phonology. Modern Arab writers and litterateurs, however, prefer to create new words by deriving them from existing Arabic roots whenever possible. For example, the word sayyarah (automobile) is derived from the verb sara (to walk); thallajah (refrigerator) from the noun thalj (snow, ice); mis'ad (elevator) from the verb sa'ada (to ascend); and matar (airport) from the verb tara (to fly). These neologisms are within the boundary of Arabic morphological rules and have been smoothly assimilated into the language. In modern Arabic, derivation of new meanings from old Arabic vocabulary by figurative extension or semantic approximation are too found like qitar (train) in old Arabic meant a string of camels, and jaridah (newspaper) meant a stripped palm branch once used for writing. Modern Arabs also like translating western expressions – for instance, majlis al-nuwwab (chamber of deputies), markaz al-thiqal (center of gravity) and mukayyif al-hawa' (air conditioning). Some western idiomatic expressions have been literally translated in modern Arabic usage, for example, la'iba dawran ("he played a role"), talaba yadaha ("he asked for her hand") and qatala al-waqt ("he killed time"). Also, in the manner of European languages, prefixes are used in some Arabic words like lasilkiy (wireless), lanihayah (infinity), lashu'uriy (unconscious) and lamubalah (indifference), which are now common words. Moreover, the international cultural heritage of greater importance had been translated into this language in the beginning eras, and thus, the Islamic culture proceeded and with it the Muslims reached the peak of progress and glory. In this context, mention may be made that under the sponsorship of the great Caliph Harun al-

Rashid, a number of Sanskrit works like Siddhanta, Panchtantra were translated into Arabic. Some of the renowned translators of the 'Abbasid period who had translated lot of Greek and Persian works into Arabic are al-Hajjaj al-Hasib, Yuhanna bin Batriq (d.815), 'Abd al-Masih Na'ima, Qusta bin Luqa (d.922), Hunain bin Ishaq (809-73), Hubaish bin al-Hasan, Thabit bin Qurrah, (836-901), Isa bin Zur'ah (d-1008) and Ishaq bin Hunain (d.910).

Study of the Arabic language is essential from the viewpoint of socio-historical, cultural, job opportunities as well as Indo-Arab relationship. From cultural point of view learning Arabic to a limited extent is an obligatory duty for every Muslim in order to performing unavoidable religious duty in day to day life. The holy Qur'an, in this sense, has been one of the greatest factors which participated in developing the Arabic language, widening its scopes and strengthening its basic elements. It was by virtue of the Qur'an that Arabic earned the status of an international language. Other remarkable contribution of the Qur'an includes its improvement of Arabic with new terminology and words related to faith such as kufr, shirk, ruku, sujud, salah, sawm, furqan, nifaq, islam, iman, tayamun etc. Above all, it was the Qur'an which polished the Arabic language from uncouth expression and unfamiliar vocabulary. It acquired for the language sweetness, music and elegance, precise rendition, strong logic and rich ideas. With all these qualities it could conquer the hearts of the masses after Arabs conquered their lands. The Muslims assumed the study of Arabic with great importance in order to appreciating the teachings of the divinely messages of the Qur'an.

"Arabic, in India, has been taught in different ways for more that 15 centuries. The relation between India and the Arab world date back to very ancient times, and the professional Arab merchants appear to have played leading part in establishing as well as strengthening commercial and cultural links between the two nations. With

the advent of Islam in the Indian subcontinent, these ties of friendship became stronger than ever before, particularly, for cultural and political reasons. Several Muslim empires were established on the soil of India which lasted for more than 8 centuries. India became enriched with their treasures of various sciences of knowledge, arts, culture and literatures.

India has been one of the most well known non-Arab states where Arabic language and literature grew, developed and flourished on a large scale. During the period of Arab rule in the Indian territory, Arabic continued to be the official language of the Government and administration and the unrivalled medium of sacred knowledge and literary achievement. Moreover, various Arabic madrasahs and cultural institutions of higher learning under the personal guidance and scholarly interest of the Sultans were set up which produced a good number of poets, writers, Islamic thinkers, commentators of the holy Qur'an, scholars of the Hadith etc. Their noble works can be compared to any work of any great Arab scholar¹ like Abul Hasan Ali Nadwi (1914-1999 A.D.) the author of the world famous book "Islam and the World", Gulam Ali Azad Bilgrami (1116-1200 A. H.), the greatest Indian Arabic poet and the author of the book "Subhatul Marjan", Siddiq Hasan Khan (1248-1307 A. H), who besides being a poet, was a great scholar of Hadith, and authored a good number of authentic books on Arabic philology like "Abjadul – Uloom" and so on.

"History of Arabic studies in Assam dates back to the pre-colonial period. It is significant to note that Arabic, in this region, has been taught in almost all stages of formal education, in addition to the private madrasahs of higher Islamic learning. The number of Arabic learners especially, in schools, colleges and universities, is the highest in comparison to other states of the country. But unfortunately, due to the prevalent defective syllabi and want of proper methodology in teaching, the output in Arabic studies in north – east India has not been satisfactory at all. Modern facilities of

language teaching and modernization of the syllabi, therefore, are the urgent need of the hour.

1. Hasanuzzaman, Dr. Hazrat, Development of Arabic Studies in India, 'Pratidhwani the Echo' (an online journal) Vol- I, Issue – II, Department of Bengali, Karimganj College, Assam, India, PP. 16-17)

The decline of the position of Arabic language was started under the Usmaniyyah caliphate which continued till the middle of the 20th century. But after the discovery of oil in most of the Arab states and the creation of the state of Israel in the heart of the Arab land, Arabic studies throughout the world got a new impetus because of the political, cultural, strategic and economic importance of this region. India, too, did not lag behind in this respect. Besides the government, tens of thousands of the people irrespective of caste and creed, devoted attention in gaining knowledge in Arabic. At the same time, Arabic was included as one of the important curricular subjects in the syllabi of various educational institutions including university. Above all, some special Arabic learning centers were set up across the country with a view to preparing students for availing the growing job opportunity in the Arab world. In fact, millions of Indians are working in different fields in various Arab states and are sending a huge amount of money to their motherland. Significantly enough that these people have been playing an important role in the growth of Indian economy, culture and foreign policy, and thus in bringing the two nations closer to each other.

So far as the prospects of Arabic language are concerned, now-a-days, in addition to the Arab land, there are many job opportunities in non- Arab countries as well. In India, for example, an increasing number of scopes for the Arabic learners have been created in various private and government educational institutions, foreign ministry, defence ministry, diplomacy, radio, television, internet, journalism, tourism, translation, different multinational companies and in the offices of the

intelligence bureaus in addition to the Arab embassies situated in New Delhi”¹.

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It is to be pointed out here that the spread of the global terrorism especially, Osama bin Laden’s self declared war against the Christian world has created a new impetus in Arabic studies in the western countries, especially, in America and England with a view to coping with the Arab Islamic Jihadi movement. Their ever growing curiosity for Islam as well as diplomatic gain over the Arab world, of course, is another prime cause here in this context. So, it is distinct that for the Arabic learners, there are so many job facilities in different areas in these countries which can easily be availed through various channels and agencies.

It will be better to mention here that in modern times, mere Arabic learning is not sufficient for achieving the economic or financial goal. At the same time, it is of utmost necessary to be skilful in some

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professional courses such as computer, journalism, interpretation etc. along with the sound knowledge in English.

In fine, it can safely be asserted that due to an elaborate system of grammar, words possessing various meaning, numerous synonyms and rich vocabulary, Arabic have been a complicated language. But at the same time, it has provided immense scopes for expressing thoughts in different ways. Secondly, like all other branches of learning, Arabic as a capable vehicle of modern communication , too, has a vast employment area in the field of education, science and technology, trade and commerce, armed forces, radio, television, Cinema etc. Arabic, therefore, should be learned with great zeal not only for cultural or religious purposes but to obtain better placement facility in different fields across the globe as well.

I would like to conclude this paper with a saying of the holy prophet Muhammad (Sm). “Love Arabs for three reasons – I myself an Arab, the holy Quran is in Arabic, and the language of the inhabitants of paradise is too Arabic”.

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