

Contribution of some important Orientalists of the Asiatic Society to Persian Studies

by

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Orientalism was an unique phenomenon in British India. European Orientalists made prolific contributions to the languages of India. The East India Company in order to train British officials in Indian languages began to take interest in the same. The establishment of The Calcutta Madrasah in 1781, The Asiatic Society in 1784 and the Fort William College in 1800, are the first phase of this development. This period is of historical importance. During the British occupation of India, members of the Indian Civil Service participated in an enthusiastic rediscovery of Indian culture known as the “Orientalist movement” and “Indian Renaissance”.

The Asiatic Society was founded on January 15, 1784 by Sir William Jones in Calcutta. The name of the Asiatic Society underwent various changes from time to time. In the beginning i.e from 1784-1825 A.D its name was The Asiatic Society, then from 1825-1832 A.D it was The Asiatic Society, from 1832-1935 A.D it came to be known as The Asiatic Society of Bengal, from 1936-1951 A.D it was known as The Royal Asiatic Society of Bengal. From July 1951 onward till now it is known as The Asiatic Society.¹

Sir William Jones was a British lawyer, Orientalist and an outstanding scholar from the University of Oxford. Jones arrived in Calcutta (Kolkata) on September 25, 1783, as a judge of Supreme Court.² The society was founded shortly after his arrival by the support and encouragement of Warren Hastings, the then governor-general (1772–85) of Bengal. Sir William Jones compiled a list of sixteen items to research on the subcontinent, including “the laws of the Hindus and Mahomedans; the history of the ancient world; modern politics and geography of Hindustan; the best mode of governing Bengal; mathematics and sciences of the Asiatics, poetry, rhetoric, and morality of Asia, and music of the eastern nations etc. He presented over 29 papers to the Society, including on the “Mystical Poetry of the Persians and Hindus”. His translations of Hafiz’s

poetry from Persian to English are remarkable.³The book 'A Grammar of the Persian' written by him in 1771 A.D earned him world wide reputation. Moreover he also edited the 'Asiatick Researches' Vol I in 1788 A.D containing learned articles and research works done in the Asiatic Society of Bengal.

The Society consisted of British administrative officials who devoted their free time to study in India. Virtually none stood to receive monetary grant from their work, and most of them met the research expenses out of their own pockets. They were staunch admirers of Indian culture.

William Nasseu Lees (1825-1889) was another orientalist scholar attached to the Asiatic Society. He joined Bengal army in 1846. He was also attached with Calcutta Madrasah and Fort William College. He rendered valuable contribution in Persian at the Royal Asiatic Society of Bengal. The works edited by him at the society are Tarikh-e- Feroz Shahi of Ziauddin Barani (1860-62), it is a historical work on medieval India, which covers the period from the reign of Ghiyas ud Din Balban to the first six years of reign of Firuz Shah Tughluq. Tabqat e- Naseri of Minhaj Siraj Jurjani (1863-64), it is an important book of history of early Sultans of Delhi. It gives a general history of Islam from the earliest times to 1259 A.D. It is divided into twenty-three tabqat or collections of annals and biographical notes. Masnawi Viswa Ramin of Fakhruddin Jurjani (1864-65) which is an ancient Persian love story of a girl named Vis and a boy named Ramin of Parthian Dynasty. Both of them belonged to two different Parthian ruling houses. Muntakhab ut Tawarikh of Abdul Qadir Badayuni (1864-69) which is a history of the Muslim rule in India from the period of Ghaznavids to the 40th year (1595-96) of Akbar's reign, Alamgir Namah of Muhammad Kazim bin Muhammed Amin Munshi (1865-73) which is a history of the first ten years of the reign of Aurangzeb 'Alamgir'. and Padshah Namah of Abdul Hamid Lahori (1866-72) ⁴ which is a history of Mughal Emperor, Shah Jahan's reign in two Volumes. Moreover Lees also contributed a large number of learned articles on diverse subjects for the journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Bengal.⁵

Sir Edward Denison Ross was born in 1871 in England. He received his education at the London University and studied Persian from Strassburg and

Paris. He obtained the degree of Ph.D from Strassburg University and worked as a Professor of Persian in London University for six years. While he was in Calcutta, he worked as the Principal of Calcutta Madrasah (from 1901-1911) and also held many important posts of the Asiatic Society. He returned to England and worked as the Director of Oriental Studies. He was a world famous linguist in the languages of the Far East. He was well acquainted with many languages. He rendered valuable services for Persian at the Asiatic Society, the names of the edited works are Tarikh e- Gujrat of Abu Torab Wali (1908) which is general history of Gujrat, Diwan –e-Bairam Khan (1910) and Mubani ul Lughat (A grammar of Turkish in Persian language) of Mehdi Khan (1910).⁶ Ross died in 1940 in Istambul.

Henry Fardinand Blochmann (1838-1878) was also a renowned orientalist scholar. Before his arrival in India he served as the soldier of the British army. In 1865 he obtained the degree of Ph.D from the University of Calcutta. In the same year he joined Calcutta Madrasah as the Assistant Professor of Arabic and Persian. Subsequently he was promoted to the post of Principal of Calcutta Madrasah in 1870 and remained there till his death in 1878. In recognition of his profound knowledge, the Asiatic Society appointed him as its Philological Secretary. An important rare ability which distinguishes Blochmann from other scholars is his contribution to Arabic and Persian lexicography and decipherment of Arabic and Persian epigraphic objects. He contributed a lot in the Journal of the society through his learned papers and articles. The Society assigned him to prepare critical editions of some of the rare manuscripts of Arabic and Persian. Among his Persian edited works mention may be made of Ain-e-Akbari of Abul Fazal (1867-77) which is a book on the administration of emperor Akbar's empire, it is the third volume of the Akbarnama containing information regarding Akbar's reign, and Haft Asman of Ahmed Ali (1873), a History of the Masnawi of the Persians. He also translated Ain-e-Akbari Vol I into English⁷ which was published by the society in 2010.⁸

Douglas Craven Phillot (1860-1930) served the Indian Army under the Punjab Cavalry and Infantry regiments. He served as Counsel in Persia for two years. He was also a Persian fellow of Calcutta University. He was an eminent oriental scholar and authored many books in Hindustani, Persian and Urdu and served as lecturer in the Cambridge University in 1912. Phillot

was attached to the Royal Asiatic Society of Bengal and held the post General Secretary.⁹ He edited *Quanin us Saiyad of Khuda Yar Khan Abbasi* (1908)¹⁰, *Faras Namah*¹¹ of Hashmi¹² (1910), *Faras Namah*¹³ of Zabardast Khan (1911), *Tazkira-e-Shah-e-Tahmasp* (1912). He also reviewed English translation of *Ain-e- Akbari* by H.Blockman.¹⁴

Thus it may be concluded that these orientalist scholars served the society with full dedication and devotion and contributed for the development of Persian Studies through their researches and translations. It greatly helped to unveil the literary treasure relating to the history of Medieval India, which is mainly in Persian and making it known to the people of world.

¹. Asiatic Society Ke Farsi Khidmat, Khaleda Hussaini, 1997, p38

². The Asiatic Society (Official Website)

³. Oriental Jones: A Biography of Sir William Jones, 1746-1794, Garland H. Cannon

⁴. Khaleda Hussaini, p.265-266

⁵. Decline of the Persian Studies in Calcutta, P.T.Nair, Indo Iranica, Vol 52 (1-4), p36,(Footnote 15)

⁶. Khaleda Hussaini, p. 268

⁷ Ibid, p.266-267

⁸. Catalogue of available publications, Asiatic Society, 2011, p.16

⁹. Rise ,growth and decline of the Indo Persian literature, R.M.Chopra,2013,p.93

¹⁰. Regarding the name of author, C.A.Storey says “Curiously enough the person named on each title-page is not the author but the author's father. Colonel Phillott was evidently unfamiliar with what may be called the *Ibn i Fulan Fulan* formula and so he misunderstood Daud ibn Yar- Muhammad 'Abbasi when he called himself *Ibn i Yar-Muhammad faqir Daud* (p. ix) and *Ibn i Yar-Muhammad 'urf Khuda-yar Khan Daud 'Abbasi* (p. xxi).” (See Cambridge Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain (New Series) / Volume 92 / Issue 1-2 / April 1960, pp 59-60)

¹¹. It is mainly a book of horses. Another book named *Faras Namah –e-Rangin*, authored by Saadat Yar Khan, d.1835, was also edited by D.C.Phillot in 1911 and has been published by University of Toronto.

¹². His full name is Zayn-al-Abedin Hosaini Hashmi (See <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/faras-nama>)

¹³ K.Hussaini has wrongly written it as Farsi Nama, See p.266

¹⁴. Khaleda Hussaini, p.266