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The Civilization of the Book

When certain concepts of Islam are internalised at the level of the individual, society, and civilisation, they produce a natural structure for dissemination of information. The appearance of the book, within a hundred years after the advent of Islam, as an easily accessible and much sought after intellectual tool, as well as proliferation of central, public, specialised and private libraries and a thriving book trade, is an example of the Impact of such Islamic

concepts as *ilm* (distributive knowledge) and institutions as *waqf* (pious foundations and charitable trusts) **Ziauddin Sardar** explores the truly astonishing world of books and bookmen of early Islam and suggests that the concepts that shaped their society can also deliver contemporary muslim people from their present impasse of dependency and impending disasters.

THE world-view of Islam furnishes us with a number of concepts which, when actualised in all their sophistication at various levels of society and civilization, yield an integrated infrastructure for distribution of knowledge. At least five Islamic concepts have a direct bearing on the dis-

tribution of information: *adl*, (justice), *ilm* (knowledge), *ibadah* (worship), *khalifa* (trusteeship) and *waqf* (pious endowment; charitable trust). An examination of the early history of Islam reveals how these five concepts were given practical shape and generated a highly sophisticated infrastructure for

distribution of information and knowledge.

The all-embracing concept of *ilm* shaped the outlook of the Muslim people right from the beginning of Islam. Islam actually made the pursuit of knowledge a religious obligation: by definition, to be a Muslim is to be



Bound Knowledge: a Seventeenth Century North Indian book binder at work surrounded by his tools

deeply entrenched in generation, production, processing and dissemination of knowledge. Moreover, the concept of *ilm* is not a limiting or elitist notion. *Ilm* is distributive knowledge: it is not a monopoly of individuals, class, group or sex; it is not an obligation only for a few, absolving the vast majority of the society; it is not limited to a particular field of inquiry or discipline but covers all dimensions of human awareness and the entire spectrum of natural phenomena. Indeed, Islam places *ilm* at par with *adl*: the pursuit of knowledge is as important as the pursuit of justice. Just as *adl* is essentially distributive justice, so is *ilm* distributive knowledge. One is an instrument for achieving the other. The ideal goal of the worldview of Islam, establishment of a just and equitable society, cannot be achieved without the instrument of distributive knowledge. Only when knowledge is widely and easily available to all segments of society can justice be established in its Islamic manifestations.

Early Muslim communities were well aware of this inter-connection of *adl* and *ilm*. To begin with they faced the question of distributing the Qur'an and the traditions of the beloved Prophet amongst the believers. Only when the believers had access to copies of the Qur'an and authentic collections of the *ahadith* could they be expected to behave according to their dictates. The first steps in this direction were taken by Uthman, the third Caliph of Islam. He was aware that the phenomenon of total memorisation of the Qur'an, and its preservation in the hearts and minds of the believers, was indeed a manifestation of the distributive notion of

ilm. Because the Qur'an could be easily memorised, its contents could be just as easily distributed. Nevertheless, in view of the variations of dialects, he felt it necessary to preserve it in a written form. As such he took the necessary steps for the preservation of the written text. The next step was taken by the compilers of *hadith* who evolved a sophisticated process of authenticating the traditions and made them widely available to all segments of society.

During the first century of Islam, oral traditions predominated and were the chief vehicle for the dissemination of information. But it soon became clear that memory cannot be relied upon completely; and written notes began to circulate amongst the seekers of knowledge. Thus, we hear from Sa'd ibn Jubair (d. 714): "In the lectures of ibn Abbas, I used to write on my page; when it was filled, I wrote on the upper leather of my shoes, and then on my hand"; and "My father use to say to me, 'Learn by heart, but attend above all to writing, when you come home from lectures write, and if you fall into need or your memory fails you, you have your books'".

What did ibn Jubair actually take his notes on? His 'page' was probably papyrus made from the stem of a plant of the same name or a parchment prepared from the skins of goats. Notes gathered like that were freely exchanged amongst students and scholars. Indeed, quite often such notes were combined to form books. Evidence from ibn Ishaq, al-Wakidi, ibn Sa'd, al-Baladhuri, at-Tabari and al-Bukhari suggests that Urwa ibn al-Zubair (d. 712-13) was the first to collect such loose leaf books. And his

student, al-Zuhri (d. 742) collected so many of these books that his house had space for few other things. His preoccupation with collecting these books and studying them occupied so much of his time that his wife was led to complain: "By Allah! These books annoy me more than three other wives would (if you had them)". Ruth Stelhorn Mackensen, who during early forties carried out a pioneering study of the emergence of Muslim libraries, considers al-Zuhri's collection as the first Muslim library. She notes: "Whether the early books were merely collection of students' notes and little treatise in the form of letters or more formal books, of which there were at least a few, the collecting of them, the recognition that such materials were worth keeping, can legitimately be considered the beginning of Muslim libraries."

But even during this period, the book - as a coherent record of thoughts - had made its debut. Indeed, noted men of learning were commissioned to write books and persuaded by students who would take notes of their lectures and transform them into coherent books. Al-Amash abu Mohammed Sulaiman ibn Mihran, (680/765), a fiercely independent and witty scholar of tradition was frequently approached to write books. Not all the commissions he received were worthy of his attention. When Caliph Hisham ibn Abd Allah wrote to him asking him to compose a book on the virtues of Caliph Uthman and the crimes of Caliph Ali, Al-Amash read the note and thrust it into the mouth of a sheep, which ate it up, and said to the messenger, "Tell him I answer it thus". When a few students arrived at his house early one day and insisted that he teach them some traditions, he eventually came out. After greeting them, he announced, "were there not in the house a person (meaning his wife) whom I detest more than I do you, I would not have come out to you".

By the time Al-Amash died the book had become a common and widely distributed vehicle for the dissemination of knowledge and information. This was largely due to the emergence of paper. The Muslims learnt the art of paper making from the Chinese. When Muslims came into contact with the Chinese in the later part of the seventh century, they quickly realised the role paper can play in the distribution of knowledge. The first Muslim town to set up a paper industry was Samarkand. It came into Muslim possession in 704;

and Thaalibi in his *Lata'if al-Maarif* and Qazwini in his *Athar al-Bilad* tell us that the paper industry of Samarkand was established there by Chinese prisoners of war. From Samarkand the paper industry soon spread to the central provinces and major cities of the Muslim empire. In a matter of decades, paper displaced papyrus and parchment and became the main medium for the dissemination of written information. Indeed, the new industry flourished so well that by the end of the century parchment was replaced with paper for government documents.

Along with the manufacturing, other industries connected with the production of the book also developed rapidly. The preparation of ink in various colours and the technology of writing and illustrating instruments advanced considerably during this period. Bookbinding too acquired a degree of sophistication. Originally the bindings were rather crude: books were bound in rough leather and dressed in lime; the binding remained much too stiff and hard. However, a discovery in Kufa led to a more effective way of dressing leather. This was done using dates and produced softer and limper leather. At the same time, new skills for the ornamentation of bindings and techniques for the illumination of books were developed. The overall result was a book which was not only breath-taking to look at but was also a real work of art. Even the oldest Arab bindings that have come down to us have tasteful designs pressed into the rim, and central shields; they are simple but have an elegance and beauty of their own. Books produced at later dates contain splendid decorations and loving illuminations with a kaleidoscope of colours.

Thus just over a hundred years after the advent of Islam, the book industry was nursed to such an extent that the Muslims became the 'people of the book' in the truest sense; and reading, not just the 'Noble Reading' (the Qur'an), became one of the major occupations and pastimes. The connection between reading and the Qur'an is important: it enforces the notion that the pursuit of knowledge is a form of worship, that *ilm* and *ibadah* are two faces of the same coin. It was hardly surprising then that in the next two centuries, the book industry spread to every corner of the Muslim World. Libraries - royal, public, specialised, private; bookshops - small adjacent to mosques, large in the centre of cities, in collectives in

special sections of the bazaars; and bookmen - authors, translators, copiers, illuminators, librarians, booksellers and collectors - it appears that the entire Muslim civilization evolved around the book. Listen to ibn Jammah, writing in 1273 in his *Books as the Tools of the Scholars*: "Books are needed in all useful scholarly pursuits.

do not bother with copying books that you can buy. It is more important to spend your time studying books than copying them. And do not be content with borrowing books that you can buy or hire. Moreover, "the lending of books to others is recommendable, if no harm to either borrower or lender is involved. Some people dis-



Floating thoughts: A sixteenth century Iranian young man demonstrates the art of reading books

A student, therefore, must in every possible manner try to get hold of them. He must try to buy, or hire, or borrow them, since these are the ways to get hold of them. However, the acquisition, collection, and possession of books in great numbers should not become the student's only claim to scholarship". And, furthermore: "Do

approve of borrowing books, but the other attitude is more correct and preferable one, since lending something to someone else is in itself a meritorious action and, in the case of books, in addition serves to promote knowledge".

Lending of books became a vogue throughout the Muslim civilization.



Akber's Bookhouse: Sixteenth Century Moghal Emperor supervises the production of a philosophical treatise

Libraries were therefore built in almost every major town. To begin with, there were the magnificent royal libraries of the Caliphs. Almost every dynasty, from the Ummayyad and Abbasid Caliphs, to the Umayyads of Spain, the Fatimids of Egypt, the Hamdanids of Aleppo, the Buwayhids of Persia, the Samanids of Bokhara, the Ghaznavids rulers and the Moghals of India all established major libraries in their respective seats of governments.

According to George Makdisi, six terms were used in combination to designate libraries. Three of these designated locales: *bait* (room), *khizana* (closet), and *dar* (house); and three relate to content: *hikma* (wisdom), *ilm* (knowledge) and *kutub* (books). These words and concepts were combined to form seven terms designating libraries: *bait al-hikma*, *khizanat al-hikma*, *dar al-hikma*, *dar al-ilm*, *dar al-kutub*, *khizanat al-kutub* and *bait al-kutub*. Two others may be added: *bait al-ilm* and *al-khizana al-ilmiya*. All possible combinations of these were in fact used. Most of the major libraries thus had titles like *bait al-hikma* and *dar al-ilm*; often, these terms were interchangeable.

Undoubtedly the most famous of the Muslim libraries was the *Bait al-Hikmah*, a combination of research institute, library and translation bureau, founded by Abbasid Caliph Harun ar-Rashid in Baghdad in 830. Many of the translations from non-Arabic languages such as Greek and Sanskrit which graced this library are listed in Ibn al-Nadim's *Fihrist* and Haji Khalifah's *Kashf*. Harun ar-Rashid's son, Caliph Mamun ar-Rashid is reported to have employed scholars of the stature of al-Kindi, the first Muslim philosopher, to translate Aristotle's works into Arabic. Al-Kindi himself wrote nearly 300 books on subjects ranging from medicine and philosophy to music which were stored in the *Bait al-Hikmah*. Mamun generously rewarded the translators and as an incentive sealed and signed every translation. Mamun also sent many of his men to distant places - India, Syria, Egypt - to collect rare and unique volumes. The famous physician Hunain ibn Ishaq travelled to Palestine in search of *Kitab al-Burhan*. *Bait al-Hikmah* had a number of famous Muslim and non-Muslim scholars on its staff: Qusta ibn Luqa, Yahya ibn Adi, and the Indian physician Duban, to name a few. Musa al-Khwarizmi, the illustrious Muslim mathematician and founder of algebra, also worked at *Bait al-*

Hikmah and wrote his celebrated book *Kitab al-Jabr wa al-Muqabilah* there. *Bait al-Hikmah* continued as the library in the Muslim World until the 12th century. It was overshadowed by the emergence of Baghdad's second library which boasted a collection of equal quality.

This was the library at the *Nizam-iyah Madrassah* founded in 1065 by Nizam al-Mulk, who was a prime minister in the government of Saljuq Malik Shah. The collection at the *Nizam-iyah* library was gathered largely through donations: for example, the historian Ibn al-Athir tells us that Muhib ad-Din ibn an-Najjar al-Baghdadi bequeathed his two large personal collections to the library. Caliph an-Nasir donated thousands of books from his royal collection to the *Nizam-iyah* library. Among the famous visitors to this library was Nizam al-Mulk at-Tusi (d. 1092) whose book on international law, *Siyar al-Muluk* remains a classic. At-Tusi, during his visits to Baghdad, spent a lot of time at the *Nizam-iyah*. *Nizam-iyah* employed regular librarians on its staff who received attractive salaries. Some of the famous librarians of *Nizam-iyah* included Abu Zakariyyah at-Tibrizi and Yaqub ibn Sulaiman al-Askari. In 1116, the library survived a huge fire and a new building was erected under instructions from Caliph an-Nasir.

Still in Baghdad, Caliph Mustansir Billah established an exceptional library at the magnificent *madrassah* he founded in 1227. *Madrassah Mustansiriyah*, whose ruins are still extant on the banks of Tigris, also had a hospital attached to it. The library served both the *madrassah* as well as the hospital. The famous globe-trotter Ibn Batutah has provided a vivid description of *Mustansiriyah* and its library. Through donations, some 150 camel-loads of rare books were donated to this library from the royal holdings alone, the *Mustansiriyah* library acquired a collection of 80,000 volumes.

But Baghdad was not unique in boasting magnificent libraries. Almost every major city in the Muslim World had a library worthy of being called *bait al-hikma* or *dar al-ilm*. Cairo, for example, housed the *Khazain al-Qusu*, the splendid library founded by the Fatimid ruler al-Aziz ibn al-Muizz. In some forty rooms, over 1.6 million books were stored using a sophisticated system of classification. Cairo also boasted a *bait al-hikma* which was established by Al-Hakim, the sixth Fatimid Caliph, during 1005. It

had a huge collection, including the personal collection of the Caliph. It was open to the general public and free writing materials were provided to all; those who wished to spend time for study also received lodgings, meals, and a stipend. But Caliphs were not the only patrons of libraries. Lesser monarchs too were equally busy setting up libraries. For example, the library of Nuh ibn Mansur, the Sultan of Bokhara, is described by the great philosopher and man of medicine, Ibn Sina in the following words: "Having requested and obtained the permission from Nuh ibn Mansur to visit the library, I went there and found a great number of rooms filled with books packed up in trunks. One room contained philological and poetical works; another jurisprudence, and so on, the books on each particular science being kept in a room by themselves. I then read the catalogue of the ancient authors and found therein all I required. I saw many books the very titles of which were unknown to most persons, and others which I never met with before or since". When Nuh ibn Mansur offered the premiership of Samrakand to the scholar Sahib ibn Abbad, the latter declined stating that it will require 400 camels to transport his books to Samrakand. The Sultan understood the difficulty and accepted his apology. Like Nuh ibn Mansur, most regional rulers of that period were great bibliophiles. The library of Adud ad-Dawlah, one of the Buwayhid rulers, for example, was administered by a large staff and impressed al-Makdisi, the famous geographer, who has left a detailed description of it. It survived till the time of al-Hariri (d.1122).

As they were considered a trust from God, the central libraries were completely at the disposal of the public; as such they were truly public libraries. They were open to individuals from all backgrounds and classes who were invited to use the library and had permission to read and freely copy any manuscript they liked. Moreover, these libraries were not just store-houses of books, but working libraries in every sense. Apart from intensive research programme, they were also focus of assembly for discussion, lectures, debates and other intellectual public activities. Indeed, many of the manuscripts in the celebrated book of the tenth century bibliophile, al-Nadim, were copied from the *bait al-hikma* - a point that has confused many orientalists who have suggested that al-Nadim's *al-Fihrist*, which cites over

60,000 books, may actually be the catalogue of the House of Wisdom.

Considerable amount of thought was given to their design, layout and architecture to ensure that the public had easy access to books and appropriate facilities to study and copy manuscripts in the library. Most of these libraries, like those of Shiraz, Cairo and Cordoba were housed in specially designed buildings of their own, with numerous rooms for different purposes, galleries with shelves in which books were kept, rooms where the visitors could sit and read books, and rooms for public lectures and debates, including, in some cases, rooms for musical entertainment. All rooms were richly and comfortably fitted and the floors were covered with beautiful carpets and mats on which the reader could sit comfortably and read. Heavy curtains covering windows and rooms created a pleasant atmosphere and maintained the rooms at an appropriate temperature. The description provided by the historian Yaqut of the library of Adud ad-Dawlah in Shiraz, provides a good general impression of the layout of these institutions: "The library consists of one large vaulted room, annexed to which are store rooms. The prince had made along the large room the store chambers, scaffoldings about the height of a man, three yards wide, of decorated wood which have shelves from top to bottom; the books are arranged on the shelves and for every branch of learning there are separate scaffolds. There are also catalogues in which all the titles of the books are entered." Larger libraries like the *bait al-hikma* of Baghdad had separate rooms for copiers, binders and librarians. In his extensive survey *Some Leading Muslim Libraries of the World* (Islamic Foundation of Bangladesh, Dakkah, 1983), S M Imamuddin demonstrates that historic Muslim libraries were designed in "such a way that the whole library was visible from one central point". The users thus had open access to the books.

As befits such institutions, the librarians were of exceptionally high calibre. The *Fihrist* mentions three librarians who served at one time or another as the librarian at the *Bait al-Hikma* - all three were noted authors and translated works from Greek and Persian. The library at Subur was headed by al-Murtada, a man of learning and considerable influence in scholarly circles. The *Dar al-Ilm* in Cairo was headed by judge Abd al-Aziz, who was renowned for his grasp

of jurisprudence. The profession commanded high respect and a rather good salary. Throughout the *Fihrist*, Al Nadim shows clear signs of jealousy towards the librarians of the House of Wisdom because of their high standing in society and their scholarship.

Apart from the central libraries, there were also numerous public libraries. In a city like Merv, the great traveller and geographer Yakut found no less than twelve libraries. During his three years of residence in the city, he gathered the greater part of the material for his geographical dictionary. In the loan of books so much consideration was shown, that he kept with him 200 volumes at a time. Baghdad, Damascus, Cairo, Cordoba, Fez, Isfahan, Lahore, Delhi, Samarkand, major as well as minor cities, boasted a host of public libraries. Most of these libraries received government subsidies; some were *waqfs* set up by individuals who wished to promote knowledge. The geographer al-Maqqisi tells us that during the tenth century, the visitors to the central libraries of Basra and Ramhurmuz

received financial assistance to do their work. In addition, the Basra library also had a full time professor under whom one could study Mutazili thought and ideas.

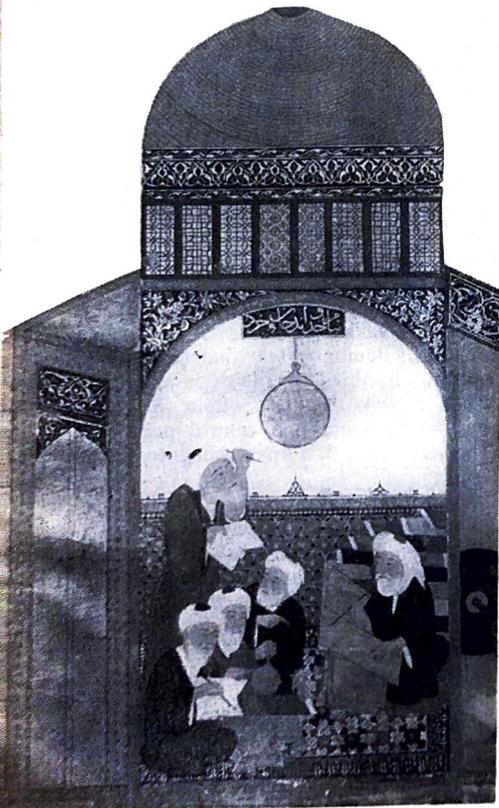
In addition to public libraries, special libraries for the cultivation of various departments of literature and sciences were also founded. Hence we find collections of medical books in hospitals; works on mathematics, astronomy and astrology in observatories; religious and legal writings in mosques and colleges; and rich and more diverse collections in several great academies. Indeed, almost every social, cultural and scientific institution, supported a rich library.

Apart from the central, public and special libraries, there were literally thousands of private collections. During the Abbasid period, Yahya ibn Khalid al-Barmaki's private collection in Baghdad was known to be the richest. Each volume in that library had three copies and most of the rare works from *bait al-hikma* were included. During the eleventh century the library of Mahmud al-Dawlah ibn Fatik, a great collector and scribe, became famous because ibn Fatik spent all his time in his library, reading and writing. His family felt so neglected that when he died they attempted to throw away his books in anger. The library of the noted ninth century scholar Al Wakidi required 120 camels, with 600 chests, to carry from Baghdad to beyond the Tigris. Book collectors took pride in establishing libraries and inviting scholars to use them; indeed, it was the main fashion of the time. A frequently quoted anecdote in the literature of Muslim librarianship illustrates the extent to which private collectors, even non-literates, went to establish their libraries. The historian Makkari relates a story about Al Hadhrami who says: "I resided once in Cordoba for some time, when I used to attend the book-market everyday, in the hope of meeting with a certain work which I was anxious to procure. This I had done for a considerable time, when on a certain day, I happen to find the object of my search, a beautiful copy, elegantly written and illustrated with a very fine commentary. I immediately bid for it, and went on increasing my bid, but, to my great disappointment, I was always outbid by the crier, although the price was far superior than the value of the book. Surprised at this I went to the crier, and asked him to show me the individual who had thus outbid me for the book to a sum far beyond its real

value, when he pointed out to me a man of high rank, to whom, on approaching, I said, 'May God exalt you O doctor, if you desire this book I will relinquish it, for through our mutual bidding its price has risen far above its real value. He replied: 'I am neither learned nor do I know what the contents of the books are, but I have just established a library, and cost what it may, I shall make it one of the most notable things in my town. There is just an empty space there which this book will fill up. As it is beautifully written and tastefully bound I am pleased with it, and I don't care what it costs, for God has given me an immense income'".

Many private collections helped visiting scholars financially and many libraries were made *waqfs* by their owners. Ali bin Yahya al-Munajjim personally received visitors who came to study the books in his library - *Khizanat al-Hikma* - which he called and provided them with food and lodgings. According to al-Makdisi, "in *Dar al-Ilm* of Jafar b. Muhammad al-Mausili, the books were made *waqf* for the use of seekers of knowledge; no one was to be prohibited from access to the library 'and when a stranger came to it seeking culture, if he happen to be in financial straits, he (Mausili) gave him paper and money'. Here the books were made *waqf* for the use of seekers of knowledge without exception, and they were helped financially on an individual ad hoc basis" (The Rise of Colleges, Edinburgh University Press, 1981, p26). It was such devotion to books and libraries that permitted the Muslims, in the words of Ruth Stellhorn Mackensen, to develop "the library as an institution to unprecedented lengths. Not until recent times have libraries been so numerous, well stocked, and widely patronised as they were in Muslim lands" (*Background to the history of Moslem Libraries*, American Journal of Semitic Languages and Literatures, 51: 114-125 (1935)).

It was hardly surprising that such intense interest in books generated a thriving book trade. The state encouraged this trade; along with armament and horses which could be used in battle, and ornaments for brides, books were exempt from tax throughout the length and breadth of the Muslim World. Consequently, traffic in books between states was exceeded only by essential goods. Agents of rulers, private collectors, booksellers as well as scholars themselves travelled to different countries, including non-Muslim lands, in search of val-



uable manuscripts. Adjacent to almost every mosque, was a booth of a small bookseller. But it would be wrong, as Khuda Bukhsh seems to suggest, that all bookshops in the golden period of Islam were small (*Islamic Studies*, Lahore, Sind Sagar Academy). Indeed, al-Nadim's bookshop, which contained the books described in his massive catalogue, the *Fihrist*, itself must have been several times bigger than Foyles of London which describes itself as the 'biggest bookshop in the world'. Thus when the historian Yaqubi tells us that there were over hundred bookshops in Baghdad alone during his time, he is talking about shops of all sizes, from small booths to gaint bookstores a la al-Nadim. Almost all Muslim cities of the classical period had segments of the central bazaar reserved for book traders: suk *al-waraqqa*n. The book bazaars of Baghdad, Cairo, Cordoba, Saville and Samarkand were particularly famous.

In addition to bookshops, there was another institution in existence during this period which seems to have been overlooked by Muslim historians. This is the institution of *ijarah*. As a legal term, *ijarah* signifies permission granted for a compensation to use something owned by another person. In the specific context of bookshops, it refers to a book that has been 'hired' not just for study but also for the purpose of, and the right to, copying it. Up to the end of the sixteenth century, *ijarah* institutions were a common sight in Muslim urban centres. They were not simply commercial lending libraries but also served as centres for the dissemination of books. When he was young and poor, Ishaq bin Nusayr al-Abbadi went every evening to a certain bookseller in Baghdad and borrowed one book after another for copying. Whenever the bookseller asked him to pay the hire fee that was due to him, Ishaq would tell him to be patient until he had a lucrative position. We do not know whether Ishaq ever paid the owner of the *ijarah*, but within a few years he had an impressive library of his own.

Despite the magnificent royal libraries, numerous splendidly endowed public and semi-public libraries, *ijarahs*, and a thriving book trade, Muslim scholars' demands and appetite for books could not be satisfied. Al-Biruni took forty years looking for and tracking down a copy of Mani's *Sifr al-asrar*. Ibn Rushd wanted to consult certain Mutazilah works to solve certain philosophical problems but failed to find them.



According to a story by at-Tawhidi, Abu Bakr al-Is'idi had been looking for a copy of al-Jahiz's *Kitab Farq Bayn an-Nabiy wa-l-Mutanabbi* and despite years of search was unable to secure it. So he went to perform the pilgrimage and during his stay in Makkah hired a public crier who called out for a copy at Arafat. Even though the congregation at Arafat was the largest gathering of Muslims from all over the world, Abu Bakr did not succeed in finding the book he desired.

This brief analysis of the history of Muslim librarianship and book trade shows how naturally the infrastructure for dissemination of information evolved in the Muslim civilization during the classical period. In one respect, it is quite astonishing that in less than a hundred years after the *hijra* of the Beloved Prophet from Makkah to Medinah, the book had established itself as an easily accessible and basic tool for the dissemination of knowledge and information. However, when viewed from the perspectives of such notions as *ilm*, *waqf* and *ibadah*, which the early Muslims operationalised at the level of individual, society and civilization, the phenomenal spread of books and bookmen in early Islam does not look all that astonishing. Indeed, when actualised at all levels of society, the conceptual matrix of Islam would work to produce an infrastructure for the dissemination of information in any society even if it had serious flaws.

The eternal concepts of Islam are for the real world, they do not operate and or have much significance for an idealised society. During the early days of Islam, the dictates of distributive *ilm* and *waqf* were institutionalised in a society that had many serious problems, including, sectarianism - numerous sects were constantly at war with each other and indeed many libraries were established to promote certain sectarian views - disunity and political divisions. But inspite of all this strife, the conceptual matrix produced an information infrastructure that took the Muslim civilization to its zenith.

The contemporary Muslim Umma appears to be facing problems even more formidable than those of early Muslims, including dependency, parochialism, fatalism and economic and environmental disaster. In these circumstances the operationalisation of the eternal concepts of Islam becomes even more significant. It was the internalisation of Islamic concepts that saved the Muslims of the classical period from their follies and quarrels. And because they have eternal and universal validity, it is the actualisation of these very concepts that can save the contemporary Umma from the obvious disasters that loom ahead. Only by rooting their information policy firmly in the matrix of Islamic concepts can Muslim countries generate the type of intellectual energy and productivity needed to meet the problems of the contemporary Umma.