CHAPTER VIII

History Writing - What West learned from the Arabia.

History writing in Arabia was the product of long development. In fact historiography among the Muslims developed simultaneously with the overall development of scholarship in Islam. One of the most illustrious branch of Arabic literature is indeed its history-writings. Before the advent of Islam, history was practically unknown as the other branches of prose literature were, "though the tribal stories and genealogies used to be transmitted orally."(1) Of course, the Arabians had a natural interest for important events. Even among the pre-Islamic Arabs, the battle day narrative known as the 'Aiyam-at-Harb' was very much in circulation. In those days of the pre-Islamic Arabs, war was a regular incidence which often protracted into decades and the materials for this 'Aiyam al - Harb' were essentially the tribal raids for the booty. Like the ancient Arabic poetry and like the early phase of Vedas of the Hindus, these Harb-tales simply passed from mouth to mouth and ear to ear till it was written in black and white. Gradually it became the cultural heritage and tradition of the tribal life. They were primarily meant for entertainment and emotional enjoyment. But they were also historically important as important dates and events were also recorded in them.

1. Dr. Sk. 'Abdul Ghaffar - History in Arabic Literature - P-1.
Practically these 'Aiyam-al-Harb' prepared the worldly sense and minds of the saracans to accept the world history in later days.

During the second century of the Hijrah the Arab scholars began to collect and write down these narrations. They now became inquisitive to make elaborate research about the early Arabs of Prophet's life and personality, of the Holy Quran. Hence they collected the Diwans of the Pre-Islamic poets and edited them with commentaries. The 'Harb' stories were collected and published as part of their commentaries to have a first hand knowledge of Arabian past. Moreover the narrators narrated the events of the Harb in a chronological order analysing the reasons of the battle with an impartial judgement on the respective merits of the contenders. These narratives obtained a definite literary form, a particular style gradually, and we have seen that the "Maghazi" or the Wars of the Holy Prophet are narrated exactly in the same style and having absolute conformity with its rule. Thus the Arab history telling started from the pre-Islamic days and this tradition of history telling remained unchanged even when the Islam flooded the entire Arabian world to usher in a mammoth change in the religious aspect of the land.

The Arabs had a keen interest in recording their religious and military activities, a detailed account of their conquered lands and the events of conquest. When these
Saracanians were united under the unifying banner of Islam they carried with this sense of history. The holy Quran itself is full of warnings from the lessons of the past. In Sura XI, verse 120 we have seen the Almighty Allah describing the stories of the people of the past - "All that we tell you stories of the Prophets, which would strengthen your heart, and thus bring you the Truth, an advice and a memorial for the believers". The mission of the holy Prophet of Islam was indeed an event in history and hence its purpose and meaning preserved and transmitted through memory and record. As the Muslim rulers were very much interested in recording the past deeds of their predecessors they all tried to keep that recorded and this had contributed much in the development of historical literature in Arabia. Dr. Sk. A. Ghani mightily commented - "the seeds of historical thought are contained in the holy Quran and the Prophetic Traditions (the Hadith)". In the introduction of his Arabic translation of "A history of Muslim historiography" by Franz Rosenthal - Dr Saleh Ahmed al - Ali wrote that the Arabs took great interest in history as a special branch of knowledge even in the pre-Islamic days and composed books on it and "then came the holy Prophet calling upon the people towards Islam, and Allah, the most exalted, revealed the holy Quran containing clear signs, narrating stories and informations about the ancient and past people, and asking them to know their conditions to
ponder upon it and to take lessen from it." (2) We find the same idea vibrated in the writings of Muhammad 'Abd al-Ghani Hasan's 'Ilm-ut-Tarikh 'Ind-al-Arab (Cairo- Page 5 & 7) when he says - "They (some Arab scholars) said that the holy Quran had mentioned history, and its mentioning history indicates the importance and realisation of benefits of history ...." Rather Al - Jundi in the introduction to his history went to the extent that verily 'Allah,' the most exalted, described in His clear Book many reports of the past nations like the people of Noah and Hud; and such as Madain, Thamud; and what He described about Moses, Harûn, Pharaoh and Croesus; and regarding the people of Kahaf and Raqı̄m, and relating to Namūd and Abraham." It is also relevant here to quote two passages from the writings of Dr. "Abd-al-Azīz Ad-Daurī̄s - "Bahath - u - Fi - Nashat - e 'Ilm - et - Tarikh 'Ind - al - 'Arab (Beirut - p-18, translated by Dr S.A. Ghani) - "With the advent of Islam new outlook began, verily the holy quran brought about a new outlook towards the past. It pointed that the past memories of the Arabs were limited; and it turned to the beginning of the creation .... The holy Quran asserted the past history and its lessons alike. It described the events of the past peoples and nations in order to confirm religious and natural lessons which they contain."

"Then verily the holy quran defined that the sayings

2. Franz Rosenthal - 'Ilm - ut - Tarikh 'Indal Muslemin - translation - Dr Saleh Ahmed AL-ALI, (Baghdad, 1963)
of the Prophet are recommended and his biography is an example for the Muslims which they follow. Here we find, a direct urging factor for the study of the sayings and doings of the Prophet (Hadith). The Muslim Arabs realised that they are the people of a great mission and they are proceeding towards an important mission as the great conquest made them feel that they have got an important historical role to play. This has got a strong impact on historical studies.

Taking interest in Prophetic traditions (Hadith) in order to get guidance by them or for having dependence on them in religious affairs, in the administration of different institutions and in matters of daily life, was considered a direct and natural need by the learned men as his wars and battles of his Companions were the origin of great interest and value to the Muslims. These were the favourite topics in the assemblies of the pleasant evening chat. This importance widened during the first century of the Hijrah to include activities of the whole nation. These different aspects became clear in historical studies.

As the holy Qur'an had abundance of historical data, this had encouraged the Muslims to study history. The stories of the ancient prophets and peoples as recorded in Qur'an had kindled a zeal for historical research.
among the Muslims and this was very much imbued by the holy prophet himself who had encouraged the posterity by planting seeds for history writings. To quote Dr. S.A. Ghani - "with the advent of Islam and specially after the demise of the Prophet and with the ascendancy of the Muslims to the absolute supremacy, the personality of Muhammad and the event relating to the beginning of Islam became the centre of interest. The need was felt for collecting every bit of information regarding the holy Prophet because the Muslims wanted to be informed to the last detail about his life. From this time begins the systematic research into the history of Islam" (3)

To quote Dr. Ghani again - "when Islam spread over many countries, these seeds blossomed - a vast and varied historical literature was produced by Muslim historians, as the expansion of Islamic empire which facilitated travel and trade stimulated fresh interest in the ideas and customs of other peoples and their comparative studies."(4) Holding the mighty banner of Islam the courageous Muslims conquered many lands and founded Islamic empire in Persia, Syria, Egypt and Rome. Naturally the past history of these places and nations, their religious, social and politico - economic systems were came to be known to the Arabs. So the Muslims tried to understand them from the hints of the holy Quran. It
is true the pre-Islamic Arabian history telling was merely reporting the events which cannot be called history in the truest sense of the term. But their holy wars to spread Islam against the pagans and hithens had made them feel writing something like a regular history - of keeping every minute events - causes and consequences of them in details. Like all other Islamic sciences and streams of knowledge - history thus advanced in its own way. From this phase onwards we find two types of history writings - the recorded history of the Muslims, their conquests and career, achievements and personality of the Arab men of eminence, and the history of the other nations. What was more interesting was that while the former was essentially based with the sincere study about their own men, they tried to upkeep the same sincerity and impartiality while writing the details of other nations and personality of their enemies. Of course this, study pattern found encouragement and acceleration during the Umayyad periods as the Umayyad Caliphs were very much eager to know the history of famous persons of other nations.

Though the history writing in its real sense of the term started during the Umayyad period, it found its fullest literary development in the Abbasid period. Yet the Arabians were the first among the nations of West and Middle East to record history and then came the other
nations in course of time ... " the Arabs were among the earliest nations to record history after they became civilised, because the Romans wrote history only after the consolidation of their empire by seven centuries." (5)

In fact, the Caliphs showed great interest to know about the earlier peoples, their kings, their social, political and economic system. Reference may be made in this regard to the activities of caliphs like Mu'awiah, 'Abdul Malik b. Marwan, 'Abul 'Abbās-as-Saffāh and 'Abu Ja'far al-Mansūr. Jurji Zayadan told us that caliph Mu'awiah was fond of hearing stories of the ancient kings, their wars, their policies and intrigues. His slaves of high ranks used to read the Greek and Latin books containing the stories of Greek and Roman heroes like Alexander and Julius Caesar etc. and explained them to him in Arabic. The stories of these great personalities inspired the caliphs and they tried to follow them, their policies and good deeds. Thus writing history received the Caliphs' patronage for the sake of their own interest. Jurji Zaydan says - "It becomes clear that they (Arabs) began to write foreign history before recording their wars and conquests as the purpose of their writing history was not the service of history. They did it only for the need of the caliphs to become familiar with the conditions of other nations. The first man to do it was 'Obaid b Shariya, who wrote Kitāb al-Muḥātk Wa Akhbar Ul-Maddāq, (or the Book of the kings and informations of the

past people) for Caliph Mu'awiah b. Abi Sufyan. The author of the Fihrist mentioned it, but it has no existence at present. The Umayyads used to name discussion of this science as 'the science of history of the past people."

Ibn-al-Madeem mentioned books on different subjects written by Abu Mikhna'f al-Azdi from among the followers of 'Ali. They contain the biographies of the famous persons and al-Qaws; one book of history was written by 'Owana b. Al-Hakam-al-Kalbi and another one on the biography of Mu'awiah and the Umayyads in the second century of the Hijrah. Nothing of these books or else of the books on literature and history written down during the Umayyed period has come down to us." One of the reasons why the caliphs became interested in the study of history was in fact the question of economic consideration. The caliphs found it necessary to know the economic conditions of the conquered lands, whether these were subjugated by treaty or by war, so that the poll tax and land tax might be fixed according to the principle of Islam.

We have already mentioned earlier that poetry was the only source of information about the pre-Islamic period. That was why there was the proverb - "the poetry is the public register of the Arabs". These Jirimin poems included the social, religious and military activities of the early Arabs. Thus to this poetry, and not to history, we owe the
the first records of Arabian past. But these poets were not historians and hence they never cared to keep the required details of history in chronological order, neither with absolute accuracy. What they did was that they wanted to highlight the memories and activities of their past heroes. They simply hinted on the incidents and never carefully analysed any detailed events. Only narrating the contemporary events, they became rather critical and descriptive. It should also be remembered that the poets were the leaders of their respective tribes and they were considered as inspired almost in the way as were the 'Kahins or Sooth-sayers and listened too with great regard. These commentaries on the Pre-Islamic poetry were systematically developed in the historical studies.

I cannot check my temptation to quote again from Dr. S.A. Ghani's research work in this regard. He writes - "Histography in Arabic literature began with the object of searching for, collecting and transmitting reports about important events. The purpose which the Muslim historians sought to accomplish was to produce works which would be useful and would improve the social position of the individual works. At first these reports were transmitted orally. When written historical records were gradually introduced, these were accepted merely as aids
to memory. The historian examined very much carefully
the competence of the authorities transmitting these
reports ... They prefixed each of their reports with the
chain of authorities who transmitted them. In case a
report came to them through different sources they recorded
all of them and indicated their authorities for each. They
collected reports from the best available authorities and
according to the best standard of authority - criticism.
However, it is a fact that the direction of the thinking
of the historians expressed itself in the whole of their
works. Their position in the intellectual environment of
their time determined the choice of the forms and the
contents of the histories they wrote, and with it, it
determined the development of Muslim historiography. The
historians did not use their works for the expression of
their personal aspirations or the expression of their
particular groups, but the changing forms and contents of
historical works were the natural and true reflection of
the changing cultural atmosphere in which the individual
historians lived. Normally the historians did not synthe-
size or generalise with the exception of Ibn Khaldun, the
greatest historical philosopher Islam has ever produced
and one of the greatest of all times. They generally
abstain from commenting upon these reports and recording
their own personal opinion because it was not considered as
part of historical material with which they should be concerned. Their method was restricted to the criticism of the chain of transmitters and did not include the criticism of the content of a report except so far as the content was related to the problem of authority—criticism. Its value in making for accuracy cannot be questioned, and the Muslims are justified in taking pride in their science of tradition."

During the 9th and 10th centuries Arabian historical literature was severally attacked by the theologians and philosophers while its scientific character was put into question by the scholars of rational science. As a result of this opposition the explicit formulation of ideas and theories concerning history was developed by the Muslim historians of these centuries. Eventually now they became more explicit in the formulation and defence of their assumption of history. Many of them began to write short introductions to their works. Herein they stated the scientific religious and explained and depended the method they followed in collecting and arranging reports of their works. These introductions were no doubt short and unsystematic "yet they were both in form and content the prototypes of the subsequent historiographical literature that reached its Zenith in 14th–15th centuries of the
Christian era." We may mention here the name of "Tabari", the most respected and most frequently imitated Muslim historian. "Tabari grew up in an environment full of controversy between the traditional - theological school and the students of the newly translated Greek rational sciences known as "MU'TAZILITES". He himself was the student of the anti-Mutazilite school and had some knowledge of Logic and mathematics. He was the most famous theologian and the defender of traditional Islam. In the introduction to his universal history - named "Tarikh - ur-Rasul-Wal-Muluk" the proper subject matter and method of history was described in the following manner - "The knowledge of the reports of the past peoples and of events recently taking place does not reach one who was neither an eye witness nor a contemporary to them except through the reports of the reporters and transmission of the transmitters. The rational deduction and mental elucidation have nothing to do in it. So if there is in this book of mine any such reports described by me on some past authority which the reader refuses or which the bearer dislikes as he does not see how it could possibly be correct or true, let him know that this report did not originate with me but come from some of those who transmitted it to me, and I only reported it as it was reported to me." (6) He thus declined to call history a rational discipline and.

6. Abu Ja'far Muhammad b. Jarir al - Tabari:
Tarikh - ur - Rasul-wal-Muluk - (Cairo) 1960 - Vol I P??
that human reason play any role in its shaping.

But this view was not accepted by Ibn Khaldun. He considered history a specific topic. In a series of three consecutive introductions in the 'Ibar' - the preface, the introduction to the whole work and the first part of the introduction to Book one - he says -

"History is a science widely cultivated among the peoples and races and it is eagerly sought after by the rich and the poor alike." (7)

"The learned and the ignorant people understand it alike because on the surface history is no more than reports about important events, dynasties and occurrences of the past centuries elegantly presented and spiced with proverbs." (8) and again,

"In reality history is an insight, verification, critical explanation of the causes and origins of existed things."(9)

To Ibn Khaldun, therefore, history has its root in philosophy and must be considered as a branch of philosophy. While explaining the nature of history he categorically wrote -

"It should be known that history, in fact, is the record of human society which itself is identical with the world civilisation, of the changes that take place in the nature of that civilisation, such as savagery, sociability and group.
feeling; of various ways by which one group of people achieves superiority over another; of royal authority, the dynasties and its various ranks that result in this way; of the different activities and efforts of human beings - whether for gainful occupation or for making a living or in the various sciences and crafts; and in general, of all the transformations that society undergoes by its very nature." (10)

"The famous Muslim historians such as Ibn-Ishaq Ibn-Hisham, Waqadi, Ibn-Sad, Tabari and Masudi made comprehensive collections of historical events and recorded them in book forms. They produced many historical works containing the history of the nations and dynasties in the world. Most of them covered in their works everything because of the universal geographical extension of the two earliest Islamic empires the Umayyads and the Abbasid empires and because of the very wide selection of sources which they did make use. Some of these historians such as Tabari and Masudi recorded an exhaustive history of the dynasties and nations that prevailed before Islam and their affairs in general. Some other historians of the later age on the other hand, displayed an attitude towards greater restriction and hesitated to be so general and comprehensive. They recorded the important events of their own period giving exhaustive historical informations

about their own part of the world. They confined their works to the history of their own dynasties and cities." (11) Muhammad 'Abd al-Ghani Hasan aptly remarked - "Varily the Arabs and Muslims wrote down their history since earliest pre-Islamic period upto date. They did not confine in this field rather they achieved commendable progress in it and extended the chapters of the study. They proved artistic ability in different kinds of history writing such as biographies, battles, conquests, classified biographies, history of different cities and general history; rather they added many things to the chapters of history to which preceded no predecessor. They wrote books on stories of the Prophets and record of the Caliphs, nobles, kings, ministers, reciters (of the Holy Quran), literary men, mystics, Qazis (Judges), singers, elegant people, intelligents, stupids, physicians, heretics, Shu'tes, narrators of Hadith, men of different categories, aged ones, youths, noble and generous people, etc. from among the different classes of people. The authors composed a separate independent book on each class of these people, which is unprecedent among other nations". (12) Thus it cannot be denied that if any serious reader of history try to get the most reliable historical information from the beginning of the world till the present day - he can get the most comprehensive idea of this only from the writings of the

10. Dr. S.A. Ghanī - Historiography in Arabic Literature - p.23.
12. Muhammad 'Abd al-Ghani Hasan - 'Ijm-ut-Tarika' 'Imd-al-Arab" - (Cairo) - p. 204.
Muslim historians and nowhere else - because the western historiography in the strict sense of the term began only after the Italian Renaissance.

Equally it cannot be denied either that Ibn Khaldun was the first man who explained thoroughly and aptly the basic principles of sociology in his historical studies. "He described that the social phenomena seem to follow laws. These laws although are not as absolute as those regulating natural phenomena, yet they are competent enough to cause constantly the social events to follow an orderly pattern and sequence. The careful study of these laws helps one to understand the events around him. These laws can be traced by collecting a large number of facts and observing the inner-links between them. So a historian by collecting the historical records of past events, observing the present ones and comparing the former with the latter, can discover the laws which cause these social events to follow an orderly pattern and sequence."

"All records of the past events by their vary nature are not free from errors. There are several factors that make for error in collecting the historical records. If a historian has partnership to a particular creed or opinion, he believes to be true any favourable information regarding
his creed or opinion without judging its authenticity, on the contrary, when a historian is neutral and impartial, he accepts a piece of information only after proper investigation and criticism as to distinguish the truth it contains from the mistakes .... The failure to understand what is actually meant leads a historian to commit mistake. .... The inability to place an event in its real context on account of some obscurity and complexity of the situation, distorts the importance of the events in the same way. The common desire to gain the favour of the rulers on the parts of the historian again, results in giving a distorted account of the historical events, because in such a case the historian endows there with undue praises and spreads their fame by interpreting in the most favourable way all of their deeds.

"The most important factor to make error in recording history is the ignorance of the laws regulating the transformation of the human society. Because everything in this world is subject to a law governing its nature and changes that may occur in it. So the ability to understand the nature of events and of charges that may take place in the human society, helps the historian more than anything else to explain the historical records and thereby to disengage the truth it contains from the falsehood. It has been often marked that the historians relates such stories about the past events that are impossible in the
then society. The exaggeration in recording the events results in committing error. The minds of the people are fond of all that is strange and unusual. So the tongue easily slips into exaggeration. When the investigator overlooks things without trying to check his statement by weighing it in a critical spirit of enquiry, he often enter into the world of his imagination letting loose his tongue in the pasturage of falsehood."

"The ignorance of the transformation that takes place in the condition of the epochs and nations with the passage of time and changes of periods, on the part of the historians also result in committing errors. Such changes occurs in a very unnoticeable way in so long term that it is difficult for the common people to observe them. These changes who possess a good speculative mind and thoroughness. The condition of the world and of the people with their customs, modes and occupations do not continue in an unchanging way and a stable form, but they are transformed with the passage of time from one form to another. The zones of climate, epochs, countries and state change as do individuals, times and cities. The ability to understand these changes helps the historians to clarify the records of the past events and thereby to distinguish the truth they contain from the falsehood."

13. Dr. S.A. Ghani - Historiography in Arabic Literature
Not only this sociological aspect in his writings - Ibn Khaldun was the first historian to earmark a definite philosophy for the historians function. In his Muqaddima" (or the Prolegomena) which forms the first volume of a huge general history entitled - the Kitabu 'l-Ibar' (or Book of Examples) he said - "Know that the true purpose of history is to make us acquainted with human society, i.e. with the civilisation of the world and with its natural phenomena, such as savage life, the softening of manners, attachment to the family and the tribe, the various kinds of superiority which one people gains over another, the kingdoms and diverse dynastics which arise in this way, the different trades and laborious occupations to which men devote themselves in order to earn their livelihood, the science and arts; in fine, all the manifold conditions which naturally occur in the development of civilisation." (14) To Khaldun as such history is a subject to universal law and in these laws lies the sure criterion of historical truth. He said - "The rules for distinguishing what is true from what is false in history is based on its possibility or impossibility; that is to say we must examine human society (civilisation) and discriminate between the characteristics which are essential and inherent in its nature and those which are accidental and need not to be taken into account, recognising further

those which cannot possibly belong to it. If we do this
we have a rule for separating historical truth from error
by means of a demonstrative method that admits of no doubt.
It is a genuine touchstone whereby historians may verify
whatever they relate." (15)

Ibn Khaldun was the first historian to put a
theory of historical evolution. Likewise in the life of
tribes and nations, he found two dominant forces which
would mould their destiny. The primitive and cardinal force
he calls 'asabiyya', the binding element in society, the
feelings which unite members of the same society - same
family, tribes nations or empire and which in its widest
acceptations is equivalent to the modern term, patriotism.
"It springs up and specially flourishes among nomed peoples,
where the instinct of self-preservation awakens a keen
sense of kinship and drives men to make common cause with
each other. This "asabiyya" is the vital energy of states:
by it they rise and grow; as it weakens they decline and
its decay is the signal for their fall. The second of the
forces referred to is Religion. .... He recognises,
however, that it may be the only means of producing that
solidarity without which no state can exist." ... " In
history he sees an endless cycle of progress and retrogression,
analogous to the phenomena of human life. Kingdoms are born,
attain maturity and die within a definite period which rarely

15. Ibid - P - 37.
exceeds three generations, i.e. 120 years. During this
time they pass through five stages of development, and
decay ... For him civilisation necessarily involves corrup-
tion and degeneracy.”(16) Professor Nicholson rightly
observed - "Ibn Khaldun asserts, with justice that he has
discovered a new method of writing history. No Moslem had
ever taken a view at once so comprehensive and so philo-
sophical; none had attempted to trace the deeply hidden
causes of events, to expose the moral and spiritual forces
at work beneath the surface, or to divine the immutable
laws of national progress, and decay Ibn Khaldun owed little
to his predecessors, although he mentions some of them with
respect. He stood far above his age, and his own countrymen
have admired rather than followed him. His intellectual
descendants are the great medieval and modern historians
of Europe - Machiavelli, Vico and Gibbon (17).

The Arab histography practically developed out of
five sources. - (a) the science of genealogy which though
found in pre-Islamic days yet virtually developed during
the Umayyed period. A lots of books were written on this.
Reference may be made of Muhammad ibn al-Kalbi, his son
Hisham ibn Muhammad ibn kalbi, al-Baladhuri, Ibn-al-Athir etc.

(b) The beginnings of scientific history in Arabic started
with the study of the life and activities of the holy Prophet.

17. Ibid - P. 438.
The sources of this discipline were mainly the collection of the Prophetic traditions known as Hadith and more specially of the traditions regarding the military expeditions of the Prophet. Here we find the contribution of Ibn Ishaq and Ibn Hisham as worth mentioning.

(c) The third important source was the Maghāzi materials - which provides the list of military expeditions of the prophet, their aims and actual results, the leader, the number, the names of the participant, approximate date and relative chronological position. These informations are generally provided without any reference of authorities by both Ibn Ishaq and al - Waqadi.

(d) The fourth source was the geography - Here we find the names of al-ya&qubil;u, y&qubil;u, al-Baladhuri, Al-Masudi etc.

(e) The fifth source was philosophy which was expounded by the greatest historical philosopher of Islam, Ibn Khaldun.