Chapter II

History of Librarianship and Library Science in Iran

Ancient libraries

Iran has a long history and is known as a center of ancient civilization. The concept of library services or access to information may be new to Iran, but library in the sense of a collection of books is an old institution in this country where the keeping of recorded knowledge has an ancient history. As a center of man’s ancient civilization and with her long history, Iran has faced many ups and downs; and so have Iranian libraries. Many priceless collections of books were built up and enemies have leveled many great libraries to the ground, but some have survived in spite of various attacks. According to Ebrami (1975, P.15) "the age of one of them existing now as a significant library (i.e. Astan-e Qods-e Razavi Library) goes beyond the discovery of America".

The oldest reference about the existence of libraries can be found in the Old Testament. The Jews, released from their Babylonian captivity by the Achaemenid Cyrus (6th century B.C.), had mentioned about Iranian libraries and archives, in their description of Iran (Homayoun Farrokh, 1968).

Another reference is Al-Fehrest, the foremost bibliography, produced by Ibn-e Nadim, the famous Islamic scholar and bibliographer of 11th century A.D. He has stated that: "In the Apadana Palace at Persepolise, inscriptions on various subjects were on stone, clay and wooden tablets" (Ibn-e Nadim, 1964). The statement of Ibn-e Nadim was confirmed in 1934 when archaeologists discovered 30000 clay tablets in the basement of the ruined Apadana Palace and named it as The Treasure of Persepolise or Estakhr library. These were the remains of the library, which had been plundered by Macedonian Alexander (4th century). He had destroyed Apadana Palace and sent the inscriptions of the Library to Alexandria. (Safa, 1963)

According to Homayoun Farrokh (1968, P.18) "The little information which has descended to us from the Achaemenian culture and literature, substantiated the fact that in the enlightened Achaemenian period, the vast Iranian Empire (Iranshahr, as called at that time) was the focus of the knowledge, culture and arts of the known world. This
excellent civilization threw its light over all parts of Central Asia and North Africa until
the invasion of Alexander of Macedonia. In that period libraries and universities
existed in the big cities of Iran and furnished facilities and guidance to the youth for the
learning of useful knowledge.”

Achaemenid’s successor, Sasanid (3rd to 7th century) collected the books, which
survived but were scattered in other areas like India, China etc. A number of books
were also translated from other languages and added to the treasury. Gondishapur was
another famous library of Sasanid period that was attached to the Gondishapur
University, the biggest research center of the Sasanid period. Besides these, other big
libraries were also attached to the places of worship, hospitals, and centers for research
and learning (Safa, 1963). From the Sassanid period, 82 volumes concerning religious
affairs, nine volumes on hunting and advice, and 70 volumes on various techniques and
sciences descended to us (Homayoon Farrokh, 1968)

Libraries in Islamic period
The Sasanid Empire fell to the Muslims after the Victory of Qadisiya in 637. In the
Islamic Period, there was a great zeal for literacy and knowledge, which was stimulated
under Islamic instructions. The Muslims loved accumulation of private collections of
books. It is said that the Persian and Greek books on all branches of knowledge,
produced at that time, had been translated into Arabic by a number of competent
scholars. These were available in the libraries of the Ummayads (7th-8th century) where
learned persons were appointed as librarians (Aqiqi Bakhshaieshi, 1979).

Following features of Iranian libraries during Islamic period are notable:
1. Public Libraries: According to Aman (1975), the earlier public library formed a
fundamental part of the first academy known as Bayt-al hikma (House of wisdom),
which was opened in Baghdad in 1004. The library contained collections of Islamic
literature as well as valuable Greek manuscripts purchased in the Byzantine Empire and
translated by a number of competent scholars into Arabic. This library contained books
in all sciences cultivated by the Arabs, and became abundant with scholars, learned
people and lovers of knowledge. Books were allowed to be taken out of the library with
the permission of librarian. Even common people had freedom to use the library
without any prejudice. All were permitted to copy the existing materials of the library while studying the books there. The best books were collected in existing branches of knowledge, sciences and literature. Students studied Qoranic lessons, astronomy, grammar and syntax, language, jurisprudence, rhetoric and medicine. It flourished until the city was sacked by the Mongols in 17th century (Thompson, 1977).

Almost every important city like Ray, Neishabur, Isfahan, Ghazneh, Basrah, Shiraz, Merve, and Rom Hormoz had big libraries that were open to everyone without any charge. Facilities such as paper, ink, and reed-pen were also available. Financial support to researchers was also provided (Marshall, 1983). As Ebrami (1975, P.25) states: “The best libraries of this time were those of Shiraz and Merve. The Shiraz foundation was built by the Buuyid Prince, Azad al-Daula (982) on his palace ground. The library, which contained much scientific literature was in the charge of a director (vakil), a librarian (khazen), and a superintendent (muskrif)”. Merve, at the time of Mongol invasion in the 13th century had no less than 10 libraries, two of them in the mosques and the rest in the schools. Yakut al- Hamavi (1178-1229) the famous geographer stayed in Merve for three years and marveled at the liberality with which the libraries loaned books to him. He writes: “my house was never clear of 200 volumes, or more, taken on loan, and I had never to give a deposit though their value was high”(Pinto, 1929,p.215).

The period of Bayat-al hikma was followed by that of Dar-al ilm (Abode of science), raised in the style of a public library for teaching natural sciences. These were established in many big cities like Baghdad, Basra, Ram Hormoz etc. Dar-al ilm means a madrasa attached to a big library, in other words it is a university (Heffening, 1990).

Nizzamyia was another set of this kind of libraries. Nizamol-molk, the Minister of Malekshah Saldugi, had founded these libraries in Neishabur, Baghdad, and many other cities for public instruction.

In addition to libraries attached to the universities, we can also count those of mosques, ribats and mausoleums (Heffening, 1990). An old and live library is that of Armenian refugees who were permitted to build their church and library in Jolfa of Isfahan in the 17th century of Safavid Period. The religious Jolfa Library has invaluable books on Christianity and is one of the oldest libraries in the world (Ebrami, 1975).
2. **Endowment libraries:** One of the Islamic traditions is "Waqf", according to which the owner endows his assets for public use or for a special purpose. Following this tradition, there are many private libraries that are endowed for public use. For example, Ibn-e Abed, the eminent scholar, endowed his library for the city of Ray. The catalogue of this library goes into ten volumes.

Rashid - al Din Fazlullah, the minister of Ghazan Khan, was a learned man and master of various fields of knowledge. He established a center of science and research with a great library in the name of Rab'e Rashidi in Tabriz. In his will, he wished to be buried close to his library and endowed it and his income from farms and gardens, to the center to meet the expenses. He stated in his will: "I endow Rashidi Library sixty thousands of books on various subjects of science, history, literature, etc. which I have collected from Iran, Turkestan, Egypt, India, China, and Rome" (Ebrami, 1975; Afshar, 1964).

Many of the scholars bequeathed their libraries to the mosques of their city or quarter. In another custom, the authors and translators deposited copies of their works in the mosque libraries (Ebrami, 1975).

The oldest waqf library, now existing in Iran, is The Library of Astan-e Qods-e Razavi, which is attached to the Holy Shrine of Ali Ibn-e Mousa al-Reza, the 8th Imam of Shiites, in Mashhad. The library had been established in 14th century and is open to public. There are about 30,000 rare manuscripts. Endowments as well as new purchase are making it larger, day-by-day. So far, 16 volumes of its manuscripts catalogue have been published (Astan-e Qods-e Razavi, 2000).

In 1878, the Qajarid Prime Minister, Hussein-e Sepahsallar, built a mosque and religious school with a large library in Tehran. He endowed about 40,000 volumes of manuscripts and rare books on religion. It grew very large after it became a college of theology. The library is functioning actively today (Ebrami, 1975).

The Public Library of Ayatallah Marashi Najafi at Qom is one of the latest Waqf library founded in 1974 by late Ayatallah Al-uzma Marashi Najafi. The library is the result of the hard work done by him during his life and by saving money for buying precious Islamic rare books. He had such a great zeal for science and knowledge that his wish in his will was: "Bury me under the feet of researchers and learned students".
So his holy shrine is situated at the entrance hall of the library. The Library holds about 50,000 volumes of manuscripts. Some of these are written in the hand of great Islamic scholars. This makes the library one of the richest treasures of Islamic world. Twenty volumes of the catalogues, of these manuscripts, have been compiled by the skilled bibliographer and the remainder, around sixty more volumes, will be issued in due course of time. In addition to the manuscripts, the library holds thousands of printed books in Persian, Arabic, Turkish, Urdu and some other languages. The library is compiling an encyclopedia entitled *The Encyclopedia of World’s Great Libraries from the Beginning up to Now*, which will be published in Persian, Arabic and English in separate volumes (The Public Library of Ayatollah Marashi Najafi, 1992).

3. **Emergence of Librarianship as a career:** Generally libraries were of three types: imperial, religious, and private. Imperial collections were kept in the royal court, religious libraries were in mosques, and private libraries belonged to the scholars. The landlords and aristocrats who were judged by their possessions were also interested in collecting the expensive illuminated manuscripts. As Ebrami (1975) mentioned that regardless of the kind of library the librarians were learned men. Some of the well-known scholars worked as librarians (Nasr, 1971). According to Arkoun (1973) Ibn-e Miskawayh the great philosopher and historian born in Ray around 932 was librarian to the vizirs al-Muhallabi, Abul Fadl, and Abul Fath (Heffening, 1990; Aman, 1975).

Safa (1963) indicates that in addition to the director or librarian (sahib), who was selected from high ranks and eminent scholars according to the size of the institution, one or more assistant librarians (khazin), copyists (nasikh), book binders (sahhaf), calligraphers (khattat), gilders, line drawers and several attendants (farrash) were appointed in each library.

A large special library, attached to an observatory, was founded in 14th century in Maragheh. A famous scholar, astronomer and mathematician, Nasir al-Din Tusi was in charge of this library. He collected about 400,000 books in this library which had been translated from Chinese, Mongolian, Sanskrit, Arabic, and Assyrian languages (Ebrami, 1975).

Though there was no formal librarianship education in old and medieval Iran yet, librarians’ tasks such as classification, cataloging, acquisition, circulation, even
provision of bibliographies, directories etc. can be traced during medieval period. In Al-fihrest of Ibn-e Nadim, which is known as the first Islamic bibliography prepared in 11th century, many cases can be noticed where the number of pages and volumes are mentioned. Abu Reihan-e Biruni (973-1050), in list of works of Zakaria-ie Razi, had noticed the numbering of pages. The number of missing page or pages, if any, was mentioned as well (Afshar, 1968).

4. Organization of library materials: Books were preserved very carefully as a valuable heritage from a luminous civilization. Libraries were arranged systematically and were classified according to various branches of knowledge (Thompson, 1977; Mohamed, 1987). Usually they followed the same classification that Ibn - e Nadim used in Al-Fehrest, viz: 1- Qoran, 2 - Grammar, 3 - History, 4 - Poetry, 5 - Mathematics, 6 - Jurisprudence, 7- Philosophy, 8- Light literature, 9- Religion, 10- Alchemy (Aman, 1975). Books were laid one above the other, in small compartments, and on each were written a short title of the works on its upper and lower edge. All books had the name, family name, father’s name, tribe name, and date of birth and death of the author on the flyleaf (Heffening, 1990).

The famous physician and philosopher Avicenna, (980-1037), who was summoned by Nuh-Ibn-e Mansour to come to the court to be the librarian, was astonished by the collection of the Royal library. He states: "the books on each particular science had a room to themselves. There were many rooms. In one room there was the collections of poetry and another room had the books on theology and so on. I inspected the catalogue of ancient Greek authors and looked for the books, which I required. I saw in this collection books of which few people have ever heard and which I myself have never seen before." (Nafici,1954). Maqrizi (1364-1442) the great Islamic historian has written about his visit to libraries with plenty of books, in different subjects, placed in large rooms with vaulted ceilings. Books were arranged in front of the walls in large cupboards, which were made of engraved wood. These were six feet in height and of three-yard width, with doors that could be closed from top to bottom. Catalogue of each one was attached on its upper part and even the list of missing books existed (Safa, 1963).
Librarians provided good catalogues with quality control for users. In addition, adequate attention was given to the arrangement of books in shelves in a well-organized system. Existing documents showed classification of the books and shelves, and this custom is still common in the East. The catalogues were prepared in book form and the entry was made under the name of the author with a bibliographical note on the author at the end (Aman, 1975).

**Growth of libraries after Islamic Revolution 1979**

After the establishment of Islamic Republic of Iran, Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance (Vezarat-e Farhanq va Ershad-e Eslami), and municipalities established a large number of public libraries all over the country. The number of rural libraries that were created by Ministry of Reconstruction Crusade (Vezarat-e Jahad-e Sazandegi) was also considerable. The number of Mosque libraries increased as well. In the case of special libraries we can say that both the government and non-government organizations and institutions have special libraries or documentation centers. During the last two decades higher educational institutions have grown rapidly which required modern and well-equipped libraries. It is the same in the case of school libraries, also. The foundation of such huge number of libraries created a big opening for trained librarians to man them.

**Library science education**

Library Science education came into existence as the essential requisite for development of libraries, which grow day by day in size, number, and variety. It started with short courses and soon developed to the formal academic level. According to Ebrami (1975) The Ministry of Education of Iran conducted the first short course in librarianship in 1938. In 1952, UNESCO appointed the Director General of Austrian National Library to conduct a 6-month course of librarianship at the Faculty of Letters, University of Tehran. In 1953, Austrians again conducted another training course for librarians at the Faculty of Medicine, University of Tehran. The Faculty of Letters of University of Tehran and the Teachers Training College of Tehran in collaboration with the Fulbright Commission, offered more courses on librarianship in 1954-1955.
Between 1955 and 1965 several short courses and workshops in librarianship were planned and conducted.

The formal Library Education Program started in 1966 at the University of Tehran at the MLIS level (Harvey, 1973). Gradually some other universities introduced library courses at three different levels: Associate Diploma, Bachelor and Master degrees. So, during the period between 1966 and 1978, nine universities and colleges initiated library science education. These nine universities were:

1. University of Tehran, Tehran (1966)
2. University of Tabriz, Tabriz (1968)
5. University of Isfahan, Isfahan (1977)
6. Ferdowsi University, Mashhad (1977)
8. Azzahra University, Tehran (1978), and
9. Iran Medical Sciences University, Tehran (1978)

After establishment of the Islamic Republic in 1979, the growth of the academic affairs accelerated. Consequently new universities established and several departments were initiated to conduct library science education. At present 33 universities offer LIS education in Iran. Out of them seven universities provide MLIS, four PhD programs while the others conduct BLS and Associate Diploma courses (Olumi, 2001; Mortezaei, 2001).

The detailed discussion on library science education in Iran will be continued in next chapter.