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## **The Impact of the Sāmānid Dynasty on the Survival of the Persian Language and the Flourishing of Talents**

The military defeat of the Sāssānid kings and the destruction of their government by Arab invaders must not be taken as a spiritual defeat for the Iranian nation because the majority of the people embraced Islam to get rid of slavery and to achieve a state of brotherhood and equal status. Also the defeat and Arab conquest must not be construed as a rupture of the national culture because the Iranians enjoyed a glorious ancient culture preserving and perpetuating their national customs and rites. The victorious Arabs, moreover, had no systematic model of government to replace the former Sāssānid government.

Though the Arabs succeeded in waging religious wars and conquering countries, they had a weak and impotent culture. Therefore, the conversion to Islam by the Iranians opened a new window to a garden of spiritual enlightenment that gradually helped to glorify and perfect Islamic civilization. The reason for this enrichment and perfection of Islamic civilization was the special temperament of the Iranians, who considered the continuation of their culture essential for their lives. Thus they preserved and perpetuated it by obeying the foreigners and even submitting to their rule.

Such an outward compromise and reconciliation was in fact a trick by the Iranians to preserve their collective memories and culture, which did not conflict with the new government, while trying to adapt their culture to the new religion, thereby continuing their national culture and stabilizing their tribal traditions and rites.

We must not take the death of the last Sāssānid king, Yazdgerd, the fall of Marv, the most important city in Khorāsān, or the sagging of military spirit among the Iranians as the beginning of Arab conquest and rule with complete submission to

Arab culture. It is because the victorious Arabs neither possessed an ancient culture nor a model of government to imitate in Iran consolidating their power along with their military victory that the Arab governors were compelled to benefit from earlier Iranian institutions and the experience of eminent families, especially the landlords, to complement their military conquest.

Overwhelmed by the superior Iranian culture, the Arab rulers recognized the Iranian system of government, minted coins and even observed the outward differences of rank in the Iranian community <sup>1</sup>.

This showed lack of integration and the failure of the Caliphs to install a centralized government to continually and systematically communicate with conquered domains. Surely this was the main weakness which enabled the Iranian culture to expand and continue.

The propagation of Iranian culture began first in Iran and then gradually spread throughout the Islamic states in two ways: the Persian language among speakers of Persian, although little known among other nations, but its existence could not be denied; and the Arabic language, which was the best tool for Iranian scholars to spread Iranian philosophy and art in the Islamic world. According to professor Homāyl, "Not only did the Arabs fail to prevent the influence of Persian literature on Arabic literature, but since most of the techniques were invented by talented Iranians, the Arab literature gradually lost its heathenish past and was adorned and enriched by the Persian language." <sup>2</sup>

The most obvious example of the continuation of Persian literature in Iran was manifested in Persian poetry beginning in the middle of the tenth century A.D. - during the Safariyān Dynasty - and perfected in the 12th century. Sāmānid poets, especially Roodaki, rescued Persian poetry from foreign domination and gave it new credit and identity.

This incited other poets to proudly compete with one another in improving and refining Persian poetry. If some researchers maintain that in his poetry Roodaki "tried to combine the first sparks of Islamic philosophy with Arian culture and to reconcile these two conflicting cultures" <sup>3</sup>, it is because he composed poems that reflected both patriotic and national aspirations and scientific and religious (Islamic) philosophy.

Although the first sparks of liberty erupted and succeeded in Sistān and a relatively strong Iranian government was formed by the Safari Dynasty with Ya'ghoob uttering a remark that encouraged Persian poets to compose fine elegies: "Why must I speak a language that I don't understand?" <sup>4</sup>, Ya'ghoob's remark, representing his sheer enthusiasm for Persian language, inspired all the poets of his time who were looking for a pretext to employ their ancestors' language to propagate it and protest the domination of the Arab language. Therefore, we must consider the beginning of this giant cultural upheaval, especially in government circles from the time of the Sāmānid Dynasty, as a love

of the Persian language and an interest in people's rights stemming from nationalistic and humanitarian values.

The Sāmānid Dynasty had inherited the Parthian culture, which focused on public welfare, observed public social rights and allowed freedom of expression. Although before the Sāmānid period, the Al-e Buyid Dynasty also propagated the Persian language as well as national customs and rites, like most other governments they mostly relied on military power, whereas the Sāmānid Dynasty mostly relied on public support. The Sāmānid rulers called themselves Emirs (governors) of Khorāsān and didn't covet the royal titles popular before and after them. By adopting a well-organized program and goals, these Emirs employed their energy to perpetuate Iranian customs and rites, paying special attention to the use of the Persian language. In fact, the Iranian cultural renaissance began with this dynasty and its growth owed to a Sāmānid free community with a democratic government that was mild refraining from harsh repressive measures.

Before describing the measures taken by the Sāmānid Dynasty toward understanding what important steps that Dynasty took to propagate and refine Persian language, we must first of all study the applied necessities of the Persian language in various fields and know what factors stopped its propagation.

#### **A. Applied Necessities**

1. From ancient times, the Persian language has been used as a vehicle to transmit various sciences such as philosophy, mathematics and theoretical sciences to posterity. The Persian language was a common language among various Iranian tribes and was used in various dialects, all of them originating from a single source. The Persian language was popular in all Iranian provinces and was considered the official language of the Sāsānid government at the end of that dynasty. Thus not only Iranians knew the language well but satellite countries such as Yemen, present day Iraq (especially Koofa and Basra), Syria, and countries that were in contact with Iran or traded with Iran such as Armenia, India and part of Asia Minor were more or less acquainted with the Persian language.

2. Bureaus in general and tax bureaus in particular were invented by Iranians, and for several decades the treasury of the Caliphate was administered in the Persian language with Iranian coins minted and traded throughout the entire Islamic world <sup>5</sup>, and all the treasury accounting terms were in the Persian language. It would have taken the Arabs a long time to change the language of the accounting system.

This was why new nations that had accumulated wealth but were ignorant of systematic government and accounting systems had to use the Persian

accounting system. Thus, the use of the Persian language for the taxation system by the Caliphs became a means for the propagation of the language.

3. From the tenth century onward, the spread of Persian poetry and literature among Islamic states was another vehicle to propagate the Persian language showing its richness. Soon, with the publication of the first series of Persian books, the hurdles that obstructed the growth of Persian language were lifted.

## **B. Inhibiting Factors**

Against the pressing need to use the Persian language, the following factors directly or indirectly discouraged the spread of the Persian language:

1. The Arabic language entered Iran with Islam and because of special needs, the teaching of Arabic became a fundamental necessity. Iranians gradually felt it was a privilege for them to know Arabic. According to professor Homāyl, Persian scholars careless to their mother tongue failing to complete its exceptional grammar <sup>6</sup> were eager to learn Arabic, considering the learning of Arabic equal to being a Muslim.

History says that from the beginning of the Arab conquest, Arab rulers and perhaps their vassal Iranian advisors tried to stimulate the people to forget the Persian language. They maintained that Islam and the Arabic language were inseparable from each other, and even some who presumed to speak for the public welfare pretended that Islam could not be understood without the knowledge of Arabic and that a true Muslim was one who knew Arabic. Such an attitude is evident in the conversation between the Bokhārā <sup>7</sup>farmers and Eshras.

2. The governors appointed in Iranian cities were mostly Arabs and they desired their Iranian subordinates to know Persian and Arabic well so that they could better discharge their duties. Naturally, Iranian opportunists and flatterers, finding an opportunity to accumulate wealth and power and pretending to be void of national feelings, tried to learn and write Arabic in order to endear themselves to Arab rulers. Such sycophants resorted to various plots to limit and eclipse the use of the Persian language.

3. The Caliphates and their advisors tried their best to spread the Arabic language throughout Islamic states. An example of such exertions was manifested in the marriage of non-Arab prisoners with Arabs and other stratagems that are recorded in old books.

4. Publication of Islamic theological and scientific books in the Arabic language was a means to compel Iranian students in schools and seminaries to learn the Arabic language. Of course the learning of Arabic was not harmful and helped the Iranian students to study other books in the world. Although this was not directly aimed to eradicate the Persian language, it made it difficult for Farsi speaking Iranians to study in such schools or colleges without knowledge of Arabic and this delivered a severe blow to the Persian language.

5. Naturally, this oppression of liberal thoughts stagnated philosophy.

Often the rulers tried to cover up their weak culture by using eloquent prose or beautiful sentences, much of which are empty of meaning. During these times, those who were hostile to the Persian language tried to excite personal grudges and ambition to consolidate the Arabic language by limiting the use of Persian. They pretended that only the low classes and illiterates, who could not express themselves in Arabic language, used Persian. Dolatshāh Samarghandi said, "Amidolmolk Kondori, the minister of Toghrol and Alp Arsalān, who was base and ignorant, ordained that government rules and regulations and ledgers be written in Arabic language and the proverbs from Persian kings be recorded in Persian."<sup>8</sup>

'Atbi said: "Minister Abol'abbās was an inefficient and ignorant person and did not know the art of government. During his reign, Persian replaced Arabic to the extent that eloquence stagnated and the ignorant and literates were treated as equals. Such a process continued until the celebrated Ahmad Ebn-e Hasan Meymandi became minister. He respected the scholars and ordered the recorders of government ledgers to avoid using the Persian language in official documents and to use Persian only at times that Arabic could not be understood by the people."<sup>9</sup>

With such attitudes and tricks, the flattering and base Iranian ministers and secretaries studied and spoke Arabic to pretend that they were learned and insisted that the Persian language be used only in private circles.

But since fanaticism and prejudice cannot prevail as "fanaticism is the biggest enemy of liberal thinking and has always humiliated and disturbed the scholars"<sup>10</sup>, such tricks did not succeed and the elders in Khorāsān showed a spirit of resistance that was undoubtedly unprecedented in history. Fortunately during these times, the Sāmānid Dynasty accumulated power in Transoxiana and gradually spread its rule to other regions in the country. Thanks to their respect for people's right, collective opinion and lack of prejudice<sup>11</sup> they were supported by the majority of Iranians. The Sāmānid Emirs knew that if the Persian language was not employed in Islam it would suffer the fate of other ancient languages that had been defeated and forgotten due to the spread of the Arabic language. Therefore, they were very careful to acquire an edict from senior clerics to write important books in Persian language. They therefore urged senior clerics in Transoxiana to consider their request as a religious necessity and not a political strategy and to issue an edict to the effect that "reading, writing and interpreting the Quran was permissible for those who did not know the Arabic language because God had told only prophets who knew the language of their people to preach. Also the Persian language had prevailed from ancient times up to the time of Prophet Esmā'il (S) and all prophets and kings in the world spoke the Persian language. The only person who spoke Arabic was

Prophet Esmā'il (S). Prophet Mohammad (S) was an Arab and therefore the Quran was revealed to him in Arabic. But, in this country, Persian is the official language and the kings are Persian (and are permitted to read the Quran in Persian)<sup>12</sup>.

In fact this edict proved that the Persian language or any other language was equal to Arabic in Islamic countries. It also verifies that the Persian language had the capacity to interpret the divine teachings of the Quran and there was no need to read or write divine (Islamic) teachings in the Arabic language.

This shows the careful attention paid by the Sāmānid Emirs and their officers to the propagation of the Persian language and the future of our national culture as evidenced in the expression "ajam", or non-Arab, attributed to all non-Arab citizens and nations. With this new edict, the Persian language could serve as an Islamic language among all non-Arab nations. Secondly, the Quran was revealed to the Prophet (S) in Arabic because he was an Arab and was chosen from among Arabs, and this was why the Quran had been written in the Arabic language<sup>13</sup>.

This edict permitted the Persian language, formerly used secretly and in a limited scope to record scientific books, to improve and be perfected, and to transmit the sublime teachings of Islam to the world<sup>14</sup>.

Of course the circumstances of the time and place helped the Sāmānid rulers because the major Iranian families, landlords and border guards in Khorāsān loved their ancient culture and rites and adamantly refused to change their Persian customs, language, or system of government, and the interest shown by Sāmānid rulers to propagate the Persian language and tradition helped them to enjoy the support of these influential classes in Khorāsān. As to people's interest in translating government documents into Farsi, Belāzari said: "Mardānshāh, son of Farrokh, told Sāleh Ebn-e 'Abdorrahman, who had volunteered to translate the government rules and documents into Persian: ""How do you write ten and five?"" He answered in Arabic. He made similar Persian expressions and received Arabic answers. Mardānshāh shouted angrily: ""May God uproot you from earth in the same way that you have uprooted the Persian language!"" Then he offered him 100 thousand dirhams to say that he was unable to translate the divan into Persian, but he refused the sum and translated the divan<sup>15</sup>".

The main incentive for politicians and religious groups was the desire for freedom from the upstarts who accumulated power and were not afraid to tyrannize and humiliate non-Arabs. For example Khorāsān, which was the most important Islamic region and a wealthy province for the Caliphs, was a field of rivalry between Yamani and Mozeri tribes. The continued clashes between these two major tribes and the ensuing disorder and chaos ignited the first sparks of freedom movements in Khorāsān and history attests that such clashes helped the

seekers of independence to attain their goals. Such enthusiasm for liberty endangered the Caliphate and spread the seeds of hope among the Iranians to rise and do everything within their power to recover their independence.

But let's return to the main theme, which focuses on the liberal policies of the Sāmānid rulers. These policies resulted in the flourishing of the Persian language from the ninth to the twelfth century A.D. because of the liberal treatment of the people by the Sāmānid Emirs, who practiced a simple definition liberty that meant: no obstacle must prevent people from attaining their personal liberties <sup>16</sup>.

Obstacles are either internal or external. Liberty can be classified into two groups: emancipation from internal and carnal desires and social liberty to perform permissible tasks and attain social goals. Internal liberty or emancipation from carnal desires is neither absolute nor popular. In other words we can neither expect all individuals to overcome their carnal and inner desires nor is such an expectation reasonable. Because the most important propellant force for human progress is individual, rooted in internal desires for progress. If such desires are curbed and repelled, the hope for progress will also dwindle. But legitimate or semi-legitimate governments offer social liberties. A government might curb social liberties, which we have often witnessed in the course of history, or allow and encourage social freedom.

It is such liberties that allow talents to flourish and help various communities to improve their culture and attend to their spiritual welfare.

Many people have succeeded to rid themselves of their carnal and worldly desires without enjoying social liberty, but few people have been able to think freely and to allow their talents to flourish in a closed environment. A person who is unable to think and express his thoughts under an oppressive government has limited scope to think.

He is like a chained man whose jailer does not permit him to give flight to his imagination.

During the course of history, whenever Iranian scholars were given a chance to express their thoughts, they allowed their faculty of thinking to develop and produced critical historical moments in the Iranian national cultural record. During the Sāssānid government,

scholars found a chance to think and breathe freely. Due to various racial, behavioral and governmental statuses, the Sāmānid dynasty enjoyed the support of the prominent families and landlords in Khorāsān allowing scholars to nurture their talents. The main reason for the progress of philosophy during that time was the gentle treatment of scholars, common people, and even foreigners. Richard Fry says: "The mild and liberal Sāmānid government not only did not harm foreign interests but supported them even. This behavior encouraged provincial governors and landlords to support the system, and this helped their dynasty to survive more than a century during Arab domination." <sup>17</sup> Commenting

on the progress and evolution of the Persian language, Arthur John Arberry, another Western researcher, also believes that the progress of the Persian language during the Sāmānid Dynasty was due to the liberal and kind treatment of scholars. He writes: "The glorious Sāmānid capitals in Bokhārā and Samarqand inspired a sudden self-awareness and patriotic feelings among the Iranians. Thanks to the liberal and generous treatment of Sāmānid Emirs, who were supported by landlords and rich merchants, their province enjoyed relative peace and security.

During their reign, the Persian language flourished and reached a remarkable state of perfection."<sup>18</sup> Thanks to the liberal treatment of people by the Sāmānid rulers, famous scholars and Islamic clerics in Khorāsān benefited from the free environment to nurture their talents, increase their knowledge and express new theories so that for many centuries the world benefited from their knowledge and theories. Zakariyā Rāzi, who believed that "one must see to believe", succeeded in conducting many scientific experiments and registering valuable inventions in chemistry and medical science. When celebrated Avicenna was dictating his theoretical and medical masterpieces to his students and Khārazmi and Khayyām were laying the foundation of modern algebra, Cosmas, a European priest, denied that the earth was round and maintained that it was insulting to Christianity to believe that the earth was circling around the sun." <sup>19</sup>

Eminent scholars such as Avicenna flourished in the field of philosophy, the mother of all sciences. "Avicenna was one of the top scientists and scholars in the world." <sup>20</sup> He was a scholar who achieved nearly perfection in many sciences and became an eminent jurist.

Avicenna wrote more than one hundred and thirty books and dissertations on medical science, mathematics, alchemy, geometry, botany, pharmacology, techniques of government, army management, mysticism, religion, philosophy and literature." <sup>21</sup> According to R. Waltzer, Aboo Nasr Fārābi was Avicenna's teacher in philosophy and the founder of Islamic philosophy was the second most important scholar after Avicenna. Fārābi had great influence among well-known scholars of the tenth century A.D. such as Akhavānossafa-, Mas'oodi, Ebn-e Maskooye and 'Abolhasan 'Āmeri. Avicenna himself, who was deeply influenced by Fārābi and Averros, can be considered as a mirror of Fārābi in the doctrines of philosophy.

Fārābi's political doctrines were taken into account a little later. After the thirteenth century, his doctrines were given a lot of weight."<sup>22</sup>

There are numerous scientists and scholars that directly or indirectly flourished during the Sāmānid Dynasty. Only the most prominent scholars of that time have been discussed, but it will be sufficient to say that many celebrated luminaries flourished under the protection of the generous and democratic Emirs and governors of Khorāsān, who were free from prejudice. Under the protection of



law and democracy, these scholars benefited from their talent of proposing new theories and enriching Islamic culture. In fact these scholars succeeded in proving that the Persian language had the capacity to translate the most complicated artistic and scientific terms. This proves the great effect of the policies of liberal governments in nurturing talents.

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<sup>1</sup> It is said that 'Abdolmalek Marvān ordered the minting of dirhams and dinars in lunar year 76 (around sixth century A.D.). He was the first caliph in Islam to order the coins to be minted because earlier only Iranian coins were current. See Aboo Hanife Ahmad Dinvari; b. Aboo Dāvood, *Akhbārottavāyel*, Sādegh Neshāt (trans.) (Tehran: Nashr-e Bonyāde Farhang), p. 336.

<sup>2</sup> Ali Akbar Dehkhodā, *Encyclopedia, Introduction, Persian Grammar (an essay)*, p. 113.

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<sup>3</sup> Herman Ethe, *Literary History*, Rezāzāde Shafagh (trans.) (Tehran: Bongāh-e Tarjome va Nashr-e Ketāb, 1977), p. 26.

<sup>4</sup> Mohammad Taghi Bahār, *The History of Sistān*, 2nd edition (Tehran: Nashr-e Padide (Khāvar), October 1987), p. 209.

<sup>5</sup> The first Arab coins were minted by 'Abdolmalek Marvān in the lunar year 76. See Akhbāi-ottai, āyel, p. 336.

<sup>6</sup> Ali Akbar Dehkhodā, *Encyclopedia, Introduction, Persian Grammar (an essay)*, p. 117 onward.

<sup>7</sup> Tabari says: "The farmers of Bokhārā went to Eshrās and said, "Who should pay tax while all of them are Arabs i.e. Muslims?" Tabari, vol. 2, p. 647.

<sup>8</sup> Dr. Zabihollāh Safā, *History of Literature in Iran, Vol. 1* (Tehran: Nashr-e Ebn-e Sinā), p. 152.

<sup>9</sup> Atbi's History, pp. 356-361, summarized and quoted from *History of Literature in Iran*.

<sup>10</sup> Dr. Mohsen Hashtrودی, *The Growth of Human Thought*, 1st edition (Tehran: Nashr-e Tookā, 1977), p. 22.

<sup>11</sup> See *History of Literature in Iran, Vol. 1*, p. 207.

<sup>12</sup> Mohammad b. Jarir Tabari, *Translation of Tabari's Commentary*, 2nd

<sup>13</sup> See also Aboobakr Mohammad b. Ja'far Narshakhi, *History of Bokhārā*, Aboo Nasr Ghobādi (trans.), Modarres Razavi (ed.) (Tehran: Nashr-e Toos), p. 67.

<sup>14</sup> Of course we must not forget the efforts of eminent Iranian scholars who have propagated Iranian literature, such as Salmān Fārsi, Hormozān Khoozi, Hasan Dashtemishāni (Bassāri), Takhārestāni and Bokhāri as well as Moghafa', Nobakhti, the Deylami families and the like.

<sup>15</sup> Ahmad b. Yahyā b. Jāber Belāzari, *Fotooholbaladān (Conquest of Countries)*, Dr. Mohammad Tavakkol (trans. and comment) (Tehran: Nashr-e Noghre), p. 425.

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<sup>16</sup> Extracted from "Freedom of Thought," Minavi's Seven Essays, 4th edition, Māhmonir Minavi (ed.) (Tehran: Nashr-e Toos, 1999), p. 52.

<sup>17</sup> Richard N. Frye, Bokhārā, A Heritage of Medieval Centuries, Mahmood Mahmoodi (Trans.), (Tehran: Enteshārāt-e 'Elmi va Farhangi), pp. 76, 77.

<sup>18</sup> Arthur J. Arberry, Persian Classic Literature, 1st edition, Dr. Asadollāh Āzād (Trans.), (Mashhad: Department of Culture, Āstān-e Ghods-e Razavi, 1992), pp. 51 -52.

<sup>19</sup> Dr. Mohsen Hashtroodi, The Growth of Human Thought, p. 36.

<sup>20</sup> Mojtabā Minovi, Commentary on Moods, (Tehran: Nashr-e Khārazmi, 1972), p. 140.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid. p. 175.

<sup>22</sup> An essay from R. Waltzer in Islamic Encyclopedia, quoted by Dāvāri, Rezā, Fārābi Islamic Philosophy Institute, Nashr-e Anjoman-e Falsafe, 2nd ed., 1977, pp. 113-114.