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## MEDIEVAL CENTRAL ASIA: A STUDY OF CULTURAL DEVELOPMENT

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### Abstract

*Medieval Central Asia opens one of the brightest chapters in the intellectual history of Islam, nay of the whole world. During the medieval period, Central Asia witnessed influx of cultures, and a wide variety of societies, religions and ethnicities shaped its culture which is an aggregation of diverse customs, traditions and social values. This period also witnessed the intellectual and academic activity received full attention and the region became an important center of learning. In Khurasan and Bukhara, Arabic influence left behind a rich intellectual legacy. Bukhara achieved an intellectual and cultural refinement throughout the course of history as a result of intensive cultivation of admixture of the sciences, such as astronomy, astrology, mathematics and medieval art. In view of its distinguished position, poets, writers, learned men and skilled artisans and craftsmen flocked and flourished in the region and Bukhara became a famous centre of Muslim scholarship. The great Central Asian scholars such as Al-Khwarizmi (780-850), Abu Rai Raihan Al Burani (973-1048) and Abu Ali Ibn Sina need no introduction. The Samanid rule as such left an indelible mark on the development of the Persian language and culture that would not be eroded in Central Asia for centuries. The intellectual activity both at Samarqand and Bukhara got patronized as the rulers and their high officials themselves used to be great scholars. The objective of this article is to give the reader a sense of cultural progress in medieval Central Asia. It is in this context the present paper has been analyzed.*

**Keywords:** - Medieval Period, Central Asia, Bukhara, Samarqand, Cultural Progress

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### Introduction

The history of Central Asia is intriguing, enriched as it was by interactions with the ancient civilizations of Greece, Persia, East Asia, and the Middle East. Numerous ruins and remains of ancient cities may be found in the lands of the region, making it one of the most fascinating destinations in the region for historians and archeologists. Many cities such as Merv, Samarqand, and Bukhara were destroyed many times and reemerged literally from the ashes, while others could never recover their past glories and left empty mausoleums, walls, ruins of palaces, and magnificent monuments buried in sand. A number of powerful forces significantly affected the history of the region, and some scholars claim that the regions main cultural characteristics were formed by the century's long interaction between nomads and settlers and the

cultures of the Oases. The contribution of Muslims to the development of education and learning, unfortunately, could not receive the measure of recognition it deserved, despite the pioneering and courageous works of scholars who blazed the trail of observation and experimentation as the basis of scientific methodology for modern sciences. It was, however, by the beginning of (8th century AD), the faith of Islam, with its value system and its community ideas had become known to most parts of the central Asia. The conquests of the Muslims as such were not confined to military achievements only but brought in their wake total socio-economic and moral changes in favor of the masses. The centres of academic excellence as such grew in Nasaf, Tirmidh, Merv, Tashqand, Bukhara and Samarqand. Due to the development of these centres an unparalleled march of scholars started and most of the Central Asian scholars thronged to Baghdad and other seats of the Arab World both in search of knowledge and inspiration. To travel on earth (*rihla*) in fact, was a substitute of higher education. There is hardly a philosopher, biography of a famous traditionalist, or Jurist, which does not include a special mention of the countries he visited. It appears that even Scholars of average ability could not dispense with making such a grand tour. Muhammad bin Musa al Khawarizmi was one such scientist who while associating himself with *Bait- ul- Hikmah* made significant contribution in the field of mathematics. It was, in fact, in this quest of knowledge that the luminaries of time like Ibn Khurdadbih, Istakhri, Idrisi, Ibn Batuta and al- Biruni set out on their wonderful journeys and visited every part of the known world. The expansion of Islamic education in Central Asia is closely related to the advent of Islam having a religious beginning, which resulted in the introduction of two basic academic institutions the elementary schools and 'Mosques'. The 'Mosque' served as the primary institution of educational activities, where the subjects of studies included besides the study of the *Qur'an* and *Hadith*, elementary mathematics, rudiments of medicine, astronomy, genealogy, Arabic language, literature and philosophy. However, *Qur'an* continued to be the core and pivot of learning. These courses were conducted by learned scholars. During the 3rd century A.H. 'Mosque', in fact became the centres of learning as well as of worship and jurisdiction. 'Mosque' remained the main place for Muslim education till the establishment of *Madrasas*, around which, during the earlier period, socio- political activities of the Muslim communities revolved. Ibn Faqih has told us that in Seistan, Fars, Balkh and Heart, 'Mosques' like *Jamia Moni Masjid-i-Matrizi* and the old *Masjid* which was used for teaching and learning. Even at Bukhara widely known at that time as *Qubbat-ul-Islami* there were some 'Mosques' used for the instruction of sciences related to the *Shar'iah*. Consequently the 'Mosque' gradually developed into a full fledged of learning in as much as it was considered the first university of Islamic studies and the centre of socio-cultural, political and educational activities. 'Mosques' remained the main place for Muslim education till the establishment of *Madrasas*. Even then they were indispensable and some of them had prominent *Halqahs*. Bukhara the,

large and small educational institutions established individually or else by the order of the rulers became the pivots of Islamic culture and learning. At a time when the Arab control was not yet firm as the first 'Mosque' was built by the Arab governor Qutaba bin Muslim (705-15 AD) in Bukhara. Qutaba Ibn Muslim built many other 'Mosques' in Bukhara, Samarqand and at other places in the region. Bukhara and Samarqand subsequently became the great centres for the transmission of Islamic faith, arts and crafts as well as for education. The spread and expansion of Islam in central Asia gave birth to a high skilled and modified system of education which is generally deemed to be a major phase of intellectual activity, initiated in the area. This knowledge was not confined to religion and theology alone, rational and scientific knowledge was also given due attention. The centres of academic excellence were soon established in Bukhara, Samarqand, Tashqand and other parts of Central Asia. People from different areas travelled to learn in the region of Bukhara and Samarqand.

During the Samani rule in 9th and 10th century education, science and technology got a new dimension Ibn Musa Al Kharizimi developed Algebraic branch of Mathematics. The greatest physician of the millennium Abu Ali Ibn Sina wrote '*Canon*' the famous text book of Medicine in the 12th century. Abu Nasr Al Farabi wrote several important books on Philosophy, and also had many research works on Philosophy. '*Tarikh -i-Hind*' written by Al-Biruni is still regarded as a very important book on History. Progress was made in the students related to medicine during 9th and 10th centuries. Zakariyya Razi and Akhawayni Bukhari were the most outstanding physicians of the region. Akhawayni Bukhari in fact was engaged in medical practice, particularly in the field of mental disorders, and was one of the first to use Persian to write his medical treatises in which he expounded on human anatomy and physiology, described illnesses and their cures, and gave the dosage of medicines and as many as ten original prescriptions. Hakim Maysari, the author of many books including a medical work in Persian verse, the *Danish-Nama* (Book of Knowledge) was yet another renowned physician. The well-known pharmacopeia of *Muwaffaq* is also written in Persian.

The main towns Bukhara, Samarqand, Balkh, Merv, Nishabur, Khujand, Termez and others became the major cultural centres of the time. Scholars, poets, artists and other men of culture from other Muslim countries gathered in Samanid capital of Bukhara, where a fertile soil was created for the burgeoning of creative thought, as a result of which it became one of the outstanding cultural centres of the East. In Bukhara in order to promote knowledge and education, a rich library was established known by the name of *Siwan al Hikmah* (Storehouse of Wisdom), containing books on various branches of learning, including the most esoteric; and the rarest and best works of scholars.

The Mongol invasion of 14th century Central Asia led to a great devastation of celebrated academic institutions besides many other things. This intellectual rename

than filled by Timur, one of the towering rulers who commanded both fear and awe in Asia during the fourteenth century. The Timurid State was established by Timur Lang. In the middle of 14th century the city, known at present as Samarqand, was described as one of the largest and beautiful cities of the world. The second half of 14th was the beginning of Timur's epoch. He carried out great repairing and reconstruction of buildings damaged during invasion of Chingiz-Khan. Timur established his state as a construct composed of Turkic, Mongol, and Persian roots. Although the founder of the dynasty Timur throughout his life time remained too busy with his campaigns and conquests yet he carried out extensive architectural works in Central Asia and planned to make Samarqand the most beautiful city in the world. Samarqand reached the highest level of development during Timur's period. His zeal and enthusiasm for knowledge and scholarship is demonstrated by the fact that during 35 year he brought with him mathematicians, astronomers, architectures, and musicians from his aggressive campaigns to his country to further boost the academic atmosphere of his reign and promote culture and learning in an unprecedented scale.

Timurid kings as a rule took a living interest in the education of their subjects, they founded Schools and Colleges and literary societies in various parts of their dominions and sort to supplement their educational work by liberally patronizing learned men.

Besides Timur, Ulugh Beg and the subsequent rulers of Timurid dynasty, established *Madrasas* encouraged the process of knowledge and learning. Central Asia has seen many rulers who left large footprints on the sands of the history, but Ulugh Beg will forever remain in the memory of the Central Asian peoples, not only as the grandson of Timur, but also as one of the greatest scholars of Central Asia. Ulugh beg constantly encouraged people to get knowledge, so that every one is benefited from education. His observatory contributed in the growth and development of education in the region. Famous astronomers of the time as Qadi-zada al-Rumi, al-Kashi, Ali Qushji worked with the outstanding scientist in his observatory. In 1437 Ulug Beg compiled star catalogue with the description of 1018 stars, and in 1444 he finished the main work of his life *Zij-i Sultani* (*Zij* astronomical table and star catalogue), that was later translated into European languages and became the basic guide book on astronomy. In the history of astronomy, Ulugh Beg is ranked with Copernicus, Galileo and Ptolemy. Today, the streets, district, metro station in Tashkent are named after the great astronomer.

Ulugh Beg and his colleagues are famous for, the establishment of the observatory and the production of the star catalogue and tables. Ulugh Beg wrote a preface to his star catalogue and tables. The preface gives practical and theoretical information in four parts. The first part explains how to determine the length of years and months. The second part explains how to measure the positions of the stars. The third part is on determining the positions of the seven planets, and to estimate Distance of Sun and the Moon from the Centre of the World. The fourth part of the book deals with the making of horoscopes. This was one of the main functions of astronomy until the

invention of the telescope opened the science to the exploration of the universe. Horoscopes formed an astronomer's main source of income. The list of tables includes useful basic data, such as the latitudes of several major cities throughout the known world, including Spain, a large part of which was still under Islamic rule: the motions of the planets, eclipses of the moon, sine tables (trigonometry was the Islamic contribution and improvement to Ptolemy's geometry); conjunctions of the planets and so on. Some of the data was copied from past works. Ulugh Beg a leading scientist of the age attached great importance to the development of literature and art.

In the next 40 years, Ulugh Beg made Samarqand the capital of science in the Muslim world. He built an academy for mathematics and science in the year 1417; five years later, he founded the Samarqand Observatory. As a result of his scientific temperament and association, Ulugh Beg was instrumental in the growth and development of scientific and educational institutions that went long way in inducing taste for knowledge and learning his subjects.

### Conclusion

Central Asia in its totality is distinguished for its scholarship and academic excellence, the centres of learning like Samarqand, Bukhara, Herast, Merv and Shiraz throughout the course of history earned fame and reputation owing to its innumerable academic centres. The scholars associated with the establishment and promotion of knowledge and learning, received scholarships and subsistence allowance from rulers. The high stand and wealthy men always patronized and encouraged the students and to extend moral and economic support was considered as an act of worship and fortune. Samarqand and Bukhara occupies a unique place all over the Muslim world, as there lived the great *Muhaddith*, Imam Bukhari compiler of the most authentic *Hadith* book known as *Sahih Bukhari*. Ibn Buttata, when he visited the graves and tombs of the famous, 'ulama of Bukhara, where he saw their names along with the titles of their works, was wonder- struck and could easily and rightly guess what a great centre of learning this city, known as *Qubbat- ul Islam* would have been during preceding centuries. During the Samani regime it was made the capital and, because of this distinguished place poets, writers, learned Men and skilled artisans and craftsmen flocked and flourished. Ibn Sina (980-1037) was attracted to Bukhara and had started living here. Here the library of Nuh- bin- Mansur had great fascination for the learned; Ibn Khalkan recorded in *Wafiyatul- al- Ayan* that this *Kutub Khanah* possessed books on almost all the arts and sciences and a good deal of them were so rare that they were hardly to be traced anywhere else. Ibn Sina also spoke highly of this *Kutub Khanah* and admitted that it contained many books, "*The very titles of which were unknown to most persons and others which I never met before or since*". There were a number of centres of learning like Herat, Marv, Tus, Nisa, and Shiraz etc where knowledge flourished and men of letters were honored and rewarded.

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