

# Bridging Worlds: Indian Scholars and Their Legacy in Arabic Language and Literature

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## Abstract

Arabic language and literature, though primarily associated with the Arab world, flourished in South Asia through the intellectual and cultural contributions of Indian scholars. From the early centuries of Islam to the present day, Indian thinkers, poets, theologians, and linguists have made significant contributions to Arabic grammar, literature, tafsir, hadith, jurisprudence, and scientific writings. This paper examines the historical and modern role of Indian scholars in enriching Arabic, with a focus on classical figures such as Al-Biruni and Shah Waliullah, medieval contributions from Sufi saints and scholars, and modern contributions from reformers and academics at institutions such as Aligarh Muslim University, Jamia Millia Islamia, Jawaharlal Nehru University, and Darul Uloom Deoband. The paper also highlights the impact of Indian Arabic scholarship on the global stage, and its continued relevance in 2019 for education, diplomacy, and cross-cultural understanding.

**Keywords:** Arabic studies, Indian scholars, Arabic literature, Islamic scholarship, Al-Biruni, Shah Waliullah, modern Arabic studies in India

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## INTRODUCTION

The Arabic language occupies a sacred and intellectual position in Islamic civilization. While it is the language of the Qur'an, hadith, and classical Islamic sciences, Arabic also served as a medium of philosophy, literature, and scientific inquiry. In India, Arabic was introduced through trade, Islam, and education, and Indian scholars quickly engaged with it. Over the centuries, they not only absorbed but also enriched Arabic language and literature. This paper highlights the major contributions of Indian scholars from the medieval period up to 2019.

### 2. Historical Background

Arabic arrived in India as early as the 7th century through Arab traders in Kerala and Gujarat. With the conquest of Sindh in 711 CE by Muhammad bin Qasim, Arabic gained a foothold as the language of governance and religion. In later centuries, particularly during the Delhi Sultanate and Mughal Empire, Arabic scholarship flourished in madrasas and Sufi centers. Indian scholars became integral participants in the transmission of Arabic literature and sciences.

### 3. Classical Indian Scholars in Arabic

Al-Biruni (973–1048), though originally from Khwarezm, spent significant time in India. His Arabic works on Indian philosophy, mathematics, and astronomy (notably 'Kitab fi Tahqiq ma li-l-Hind') greatly enriched the Arabic corpus of knowledge.

Scholars such as Amir Khusro (1253–1325), though better known for Persian poetry, also wrote in Arabic. Other theologians produced commentaries on Arabic works of tafsir, hadith, and fiqh.

### 4. Medieval Contributions

During the Delhi Sultanate and Mughal era, Arabic remained central to Islamic scholarship. Madrasas produced scholars who wrote Arabic treatises on logic, jurisprudence, and theology. Sufi saints such as Nizamuddin Auliya and their disciples used Arabic for religious discourse. Shah Waliullah of Delhi (1703–1762) translated the Qur'an into Persian but also wrote extensively in Arabic, including his influential 'Hujjatullah al-Baligha.' His writings had a major impact in the Arab world.

### **The translation movement and the House of Wisdom:**

Beginning in the 8th century, the Abbasid Caliphate in Baghdad became a hub for the Translation Movement, where texts from across the known world were gathered and translated into Arabic. The city's House of Wisdom was a central institution in this process, employing translators who rendered Sanskrit works into Arabic.

Mathematics and astronomy: Indian mathematical texts were foundational to the development of these sciences in the Arab world.

The works of Indian mathematicians such as Aryabhata and Brahmagupta were translated into Arabic.

Al-Fazari translated Brahmagupta's Brahmasphutasiddhanta into Arabic as the Sindhind, which exposed Arab scholars to Indian astronomy before they became familiar with Ptolemaic models.

This transmission introduced the Indian decimal numeral system, including the concept of zero, to the Arab world, a system that would later be adopted globally as the "Arabic numeral system".

The renowned Arab mathematician al-Khwarizmi studied Sanskrit and played a pivotal role in disseminating Indian numerals. The word "algorithm" is derived from his name.

Medicine: Ancient Indian medical knowledge from texts like the Sushruta Samhita and Charaka Samhita was translated and integrated into Arabic medicine.

Physicians like Manka al-Hindi traveled to Baghdad to share their knowledge. Manka is said to have cured Caliph Harun al-Rashid of an illness, leading to the translation of Indian medical works.

Notable Arab physicians, including Al-Razi, incorporated Indian methodologies into their medical treatises.

Literature and philosophy: Indian literature also crossed cultures, providing new ideas for storytelling and ethics.

The Indian collection of fables, the Panchatantra, was famously translated into Arabic as Kalila wa Dimna in the 8th century by Ibn al-Muqaffa, significantly influencing Arabic literature.

Indian philosophical texts on logic and metaphysics were also translated, fueling intellectual debates within the Islamic world.

### **5. Modern Contributions (19th–21st Century)**

The 19th century witnessed a revival of Arabic studies in India, particularly through Sir Syed Ahmad Khan's Aligarh Movement. Institutions such as Aligarh Muslim University (founded in 1875) became centers for Arabic language and literature.

Abul Kalam Azad (1888–1958), a nationalist leader, was a remarkable Arabic scholar whose Qur'anic exegesis 'Tarjuman al-Qur'an' drew upon deep Arabic sources. Shibli Nomani (1857–1914) produced Arabic poetry and scholarly works that earned recognition across the Arab world.

### **Modern contributions and enduring legacy:**

The tradition of Indian scholarship in Arabic continued and flourished for centuries, producing a rich body of original work and literary figures.

Continuing scholarship: Arabic language and literature became well-established in India. Institutions like Darul Uloom Deoband and Nadwatul Ulama fostered Arabic learning and produced generations of poets, writers, and scholars.

Literary figures: Modern Indian scholars achieved international fame for their Arabic literary works.

Abul Hassan Ali al-Nadwi (1914–1999) was a celebrated author known for his book Islam and the World.

Major Contributions Nadwi to Arabic literature

1. Mādhā Khasira al-‘Ālam bi-Inhīṭāt al-Muslimīn (What Did the World Lose Due to the Decline of Muslims?)

This masterpiece is considered one of the most significant books of 20th-century Arabic literature. The book offers a critical historical analysis of the decline of Muslim civilization and its profound negative impact on global progress and morality. Its powerful and accessible style resonated deeply with intellectuals across the Arab world, inspiring a new generation of Islamic thinkers and revivalists.

1. Arabic language textbooks

Al-Nadwi wrote several textbooks to teach the Arabic language, particularly for non-native speakers in the Indian subcontinent. Al-Qira'ah al-Rashidah is a multi-volume series that has been widely used in madrasas and Islamic

educational institutions in India and beyond. Mukhtārāt min Adab al-'Arab is another anthology that compiles selections from Arabic literature to promote the language and literary appreciation.

## 2. Biographical literature

He was a masterful biographer, presenting the lives of influential Islamic figures in a captivating and inspiring manner. His multi-volume work *Tarīkh Da'wah wa 'Azīmah* (Saviours of Islamic Spirit) chronicles the lives of key Islamic revivalists, providing role models for contemporary Muslims.

*Qaṣaṣ al-Nabiyyīn li-al-Aṭfāl* (Stories of the Prophets for Children) summarizes the lives of Allah's prophets, making them accessible to a younger audience.

## 3. Influence on children's literature

Al-Nadwi made immense contributions to Arabic children's literature, understanding its importance for the intellectual and moral development of the young. By drawing on authentic Islamic sources like the Quran and hadith, he wrote stories and biographies for children that were both educational and engaging.

Stylistic and thematic innovations

1. Eloquent and direct prose: Al-Nadwi wrote with a lucid, eloquent, and simple style that was easy for both native and non-native Arabic speakers to understand. His writing was known for its clarity and the ability to speak directly to the reader.
2. Accessible modernization: As an Indian scholar who wrote in Arabic, he revitalized the language with a modern feel, departing from the often dense and complex classical style. This made his works popular not only in India but also throughout the Arab world.
3. Synthesis of tradition and modernity: Al-Nadwi was a prominent voice in the call for Islamic revival, stressing the need for Muslims to engage with the modern world while remaining rooted in Islamic principles. His works explored the challenges posed by Western materialism and advocated for a spiritual and intellectual reawakening.

## International recognition

Al-Nadwi's mastery of Arabic and his insightful writings earned him significant international acclaim. He was awarded the prestigious King Faisal International Prize for Service to Islam in 1980.

He was also a member of the League of Islamic Universities and the Arabic language academies of Syria and Jordan, solidifying his standing as a world-class Arabist.

Abdul Aziz Maimoni (1888–1978) was an eminent authority on Arabic language and literature.

Literary inspiration: The cultural exchange was not one-sided. Modern Arab poets have been inspired by Indian themes and imagery, incorporating Indian symbols and figures into their own works. For example, the Egyptian poet Ahmad Shauqi composed a tribute to Mahatma Gandhi.

In the 19th and 21st centuries, universities such as Jamia Millia Islamia, Jawaharlal Nehru University, and Darul Uloom Deoband carried forward Arabic teaching and research. Contemporary scholars engage with Arabic linguistics, translation studies, and comparative literature, keeping India connected to global Arabic scholarship.

## 6. Contributions to Arabic Literature and Sciences

Indian scholars contributed to tafsir (Qur'anic exegesis), hadith compilation, fiqh (jurisprudence), kalam (theology), and adab (literature). Works like *Hujjatullah al-Baligha* (Shah Waliullah), Arabic poetry of Shibli Nomani, and modern linguistic studies at Indian universities testify to the breadth of Indian engagement with Arabic. Scientific contributions, especially during the medieval period, also linked Indian knowledge systems with the Arabic intellectual tradition.

## 7. Role of Indian Universities

Institutions such as Aligarh Muslim University, Jamia Millia Islamia, Jawaharlal Nehru University, and Osmania University played pivotal roles in developing modern Arabic studies. They produce research in Arabic linguistics, modern Arabic literature, and translation. Darul Uloom Deoband continues the traditional madrasa approach, producing scholars deeply rooted in Arabic texts.

## Major universities driving Arabic studies

Many Indian universities and colleges have dedicated departments for Arabic studies, cultivating the next generation of scholars and linguists.

**Aligarh Muslim University (AMU):** Founded by Sir Syed Ahmad Khan, AMU has a long history of fostering Arabic studies. The Department of Arabic publishes the internationally circulated *Journal of the Indian Academy of Arabic* and offers undergraduate, postgraduate, and Ph.D. programs.

**Jamia Millia Islamia (JMI):** JMI's Department of Arabic, established in 1988, is a prominent center for Arabic language, literature, and Indo-Arab heritage. It offers job-oriented courses with a focus on conversational and functional Arabic, along with advanced degrees.

**Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU):** JNU's Centre of Arabic and African Studies (CAAS) is known for its modern and skill-based approach to language education. The program emphasizes speaking, reading, writing, and translation, and even attracts foreign students from countries like China, Japan, and Yemen.

**University of Delhi (DU):** The Department of Arabic at DU offers master's programs with a curriculum that includes classical and modern literature, translation, and communicative skills. Graduates are employed in academia, translation bureaus, and embassies.

**Maulana Azad National Urdu University (MANUU):**

As a central university, MANUU supports Arabic studies through its academic programs and publications, contributing to the discourse on Indo-Arab cultural relations.

**University of Calicut:**

The Arabic department, founded in 1974, is a major hub for higher studies and research, with a notable focus on Kerala's strong Arabic educational tradition.

**8. Global Impact of Indian Arabic Scholarship**

Indian Arabic works circulated widely in the Arab world, particularly during the Mughal and colonial periods. Shah Waliullah's writings were studied in Mecca and Medina. In the modern era, Indian graduates from AMU and JNU publish research that is recognized internationally. Indian scholars also contribute to translation of Arabic works into English, facilitating global access.

**9. Contemporary Relevance**

Arabic studies remain relevant for India's cultural diplomacy, given the strong ties with Gulf countries. Proficiency in Arabic enhances employment opportunities in translation, education, and international relations. Indian universities continue to send students and scholars abroad for higher research in Arabic, maintaining a vibrant intellectual exchange.

**10. Challenges and Future Directions**

Challenges facing Arabic studies in India include underfunding, declining student interest in classical studies, and the need to balance traditional and modern approaches. The future requires integration of digital tools, translation projects, and collaboration with Arab universities. Strengthening Arabic studies will not only preserve a rich heritage but also serve India's global cultural and economic interests.

**CONCLUSION**

From Al-Biruni to Shah Waliullah, and from Shibli Nomani to modern academics in AMU and JNU, Indian scholars have made enduring contributions to Arabic language and literature. Their work reflects a unique blend of intellectual depth and cultural synthesis. As of 2019, Arabic studies in India continue to thrive, offering new opportunities for intercultural dialogue and scholarly advancement.

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