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# Was the Prophet of Islam Unlettered?

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Dr. Syed Abdul Latif.

In several places in the Quran, Muhammad, the Prophet of Islam (Peace on him!), is referred to as "Ummi" (أُمِّي). This word has invariably been translated into English as "unlettered" or "illiterate." The same connotation is attached to the term even in the Urdu renderings of the Quran. The notion, as I find, has been inherited from the earliest commentators of the Quran and has throughout the history of Islam clung in varying degree to the Muslim mind. In fact, as recently as 1964, when I issued my monograph, 'The Mind Al-Quran Builds', I had to yield to the same connotation in my translation of a Quranic passage introduced into my work. It was only when I was engaged subsequently in searching for source material in the Quran and the Hadith for the 'Bases of Islamic Culture' published in 1959, that I realised that in this regard a great injustice had been done to the Prophet by his own followers.

I have looked into this question very carefully. My impression is that this notion has arisen from another erroneous notion which has prevailed among the followers of the Faith. This second notion is that

the Prophet was but an instrument of the *Wahi* delivered to him through Gabriel, in other words, was a mere automaton possessing no personality of his own, and that his duty was simply to communicate it to others in the form in which it was delivered to him. The issue before the commentators of the Quran was how to convince the world at large that the text of the Quran stood in its purity and that the Prophet had neither inserted anything therein from the earlier scriptures nor had he himself altered its text in any manner, except by investing him, as a matter of compulsive necessity, with a divinely ordained state of illiteracy. That was the easiest way to substantiate also the statement of the Quran that its text was guaranteed by God Himself to remain pure and unaltered for all times.

The question may be asked: Was illiteracy a criterion of prophethood? Was Moses, for instance, an illiterate person? Would a prophet who had been charged by God to communicate to those around him His message, as delivered to him, ever attempt to alter it? If the answer is in the negative, why was Muhammad alone chosen to remain illiterate?

Evidently our commentators of the Quran have not realised the significance of the rider attached to the privilege of receiving the *Wahi* or Revelation from God. The rider was that the Prophet was not merely to communicate the word of revelation or *Kitab* recieved by him to others, but to *teach* this *Kitab* to them and explain or bring home to them the wisdom or the purpose underlying it and take measures to purify their lives:

لقد من الله على المؤمنين اذ بعث فيهم رسولا من انفسهم يتلوا عليهم آياته ويزكيهم ويعلمهم الكتاب والحكمة، وان كانوا من قبل لفي ضلال مبين \* (القرآن: آل عمران ٣ ع ١٧ آية: ١٦٣).

“Now hath God been gracious to the faithful, by having raised up among them a messenger from among themselves to rehearse to them His messages and to teach them the Book and explain the wisdom underlying it; for, aforetime they were assuredly in manifest error”.<sup>1</sup>

When such was the duty imposed on the recipient of the *Wahi*, namely the Prophet, the question becomes pertinent: What intellectual or educational equipment, apart from the moral or spiritual, had he already had that he could confidently accept this assignment? That he did respond, with all the strength of his being, to the Divine Call to duty is an open fact of history. But where is the material which will help us to have a view of this equipment?

It is a pity that our historians have paid little attention to the life of the Prophet as lived by him during his first forty years or till the great Call came to him. They have all concentrated their attention on the days of his prophethood, giving even minute details of his day to day life. None of them has given more than thirty pages at the most to the Prophet's early life, during which his mind must have grown and developed into a state when it was marked out by God as a mind worthy of receiving the final divine Revelation.

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1. Quran. 3 : 163.

Had the details of the Prophet's early life been recorded with the same earnestness with which the facts of his later life were noted, we would not have fallen into the egregious blunder of calling him an illiterate person. It was high time that scholars interested in the history of Islam turned their attention to this serious lapse in our approach to the life of the Prophet. <sup>1</sup>

The primary duty of our Prophet, as required by the Quran, was to *teach* the Quran to his people. The minimum qualification of one who has to teach from a Book or impart the knowledge it contains, according to the Quran, is to have the ability to use the pen or atleast to have the ability to read what has been recorded by the pen. This is made absolutely clear by the Quran itself in the very first *Wahi* or revelation delivered to the Prophet. It runs :

ربك الاكرم • الذي علم بالقلم • علم الانسان ما لم يعلم •

“Thy Lord is the most beneficent Who hath afforded knowledge by the pen — hath afforded to man what he knew not.” <sup>2</sup>

It may be noted that most of the revelations dwelling on the need for acquiring knowledge and on the use of the pen and the writing material, all belong to

1. A good deal of matter touching the early life of the Prophet is still in manuscript form, as disclosed by Dr. M. Yusufuddin in his paper on “ Pre-Bukhari Hadith Literature ” recently published by the Institute of Indo-Middle East Cultural Studies, Hyderabad. Should the unpublished matter referred to therein see the light of day, it might be possible to view the early life of the Prophet in its true perspective,
2. Quran 96, 3-5.

the early Meccan period of prophethood. In fact, one of the Meccan *Suras* is entitled '*al-Qa'lam*' or 'The Pen.' When such is the value which the Quran itself attaches to the use of the pen for the promotion of knowledge or to the teaching of the *Kitab* or revelation, is it conceivable that the Prophet would have discarded that pen for the full length of his life and remained illiterate, especially when he had been charged as Prophet to teach the Quran to his people? <sup>1</sup>

It is very strange that our commentators of the Quran and its translators should have missed to note a clear endorsement of the Quran that Muhammad (Peace on him!) was : رسول من الله يتلوا صحفا مطهرة : "a Messenger of God reading out pure pages wherein are the true Scriptures." <sup>2</sup> Mark! that the Quran does not state that the Prophet was reciting from mere memory but from written pages.

The Prophet in his role as teacher to his people, had to declare in clear language that "acquisition of knowledge was binding on all believers, both men and women," <sup>3</sup> and this was to be pursued by the use of the pen.<sup>4</sup>

That the Prophet attached greater importance to the acquisition of knowledge by his people than even to the ritual of prayer is clear from the following Hadith :

1. Quran, 3 : 163.
2. Quran, 98 : 2-3.
3. Ibn Maja: *Kitab al-Ilm*.
4. Quran, 96 : 3-5.

- 1 "Narrates Abdullah bin Umar: "The Prophet once noticed two groups of his followers sitting in his mosque, and observed: 'Both are goodly groups, but one is better occupied than the other. One is invoking God for favours. It is for God to concede or not to concede the favours asked for. But the other group is engaged in acquiring knowledge and also in imparting it to those who are ignorant. This group is better occupied than the other. In fact, I am myself entrusted with the task of teaching' (بُعِثْتُ مَعَالِهَا). Saying this, he took his seat in the midst of this group."<sup>1</sup>
2. "The best form of devotion to God is to seek knowledge." (*Kunuzul Haqiq*).  
 "The acquisition of knowledge is better than worship." (Tabrani: *Awsat*, and *Bazzar*).

History has recorded that in the pursuit of this primary duty of his to impart knowledge to his people, he had a school called '*Suffa*' attached to his mosque where he supervised the work of both the teachers and the taught and where at times he himself took classes, as occasion arose. Those who completed their courses of training were sent out to the different parts of the State to arrange there similar courses of studies. At '*Suffa*' the learners were of all ages, and one day a week was given exclusively to the women-folk.<sup>2</sup> In fact, so zealous was the Prophet in popularising the art of writing among his followers studying at this school that he required every one of such prisoners of

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1. *Sunan Ibn Maja, Sunan Darimi, and Mishkat.*  
 2. *Bukhari, Part-I, Kitab al-Ilm.*



war taken at the battle of Badr as were proficient in the art of writing to instruct ten of his followers in the art of writing in lieu of the customary ransom payable for securing one's freedom.<sup>1</sup> History also records that the members of his family, both male and female, including his personal attendants, as also the immediate circle of his companions together with the members of their families, were either literate prior to their embracing Islam or were required by him to qualify themselves in the art of writing. Not merely this, while sending out governors to the different provinces of the State, the Prophet gave them specific instructions to promote the education of the people under their care.<sup>2</sup>

Could such a leader of men who was so keen on affording facilities to his followers to learn, as a prerequisite of their education, the art of writing, deny to himself the benefit of it?

There is no doubt that the Quran styles the Prophet as '*Ummi*' or, as one of the '*Ummiyun*'<sup>3</sup> (plural of *Ummi*). But does the word '*Ummi*' mean only an illiterate? The two words '*Ummi*' and '*Ummiyun*' are

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1. Ibn Sa'ad: *Tabaqat*, Vol. II, Part XI, P. 14; also Bukhari: *Mawaqit al-Salat*, and also Ahmed bin Hanbal: *Musnad*, Vol. I, P. 198 (New Ed.).
  2. Dr. Hameedullah: *Al-Wasaiq al-Siyasiah*, No. 105, also Tabari: *Annals of the Eleventh Hijri*, pp. 1852-1853 & 1883.
  3. See on this subject a very informative article entitled "*Ummiyun*" by Mawlana Sayeed Ahmed Akbarabadi, Vol. III, No. 3 of the "*Fikr wa Nazar*," a quarterly Journal in Urdu issued by the Aligarh Muslim University.

used in a number of verses of the Quran. Do they convey the same sense everywhere? The word '*Ummi*' has several connotations. Etymologically it means one who has just emerged from the womb of his mother. It is with reference to this state of life that the term '*Ummi*' has acquired the applied sense of one who cannot read or write. The term '*Ummi*' also means one who lived in the "*Ummu al-qura*" or mother-city or metropolis by which title Mecca was known to the Arabs of the time of the Prophet. The term also means one who is not conversant with the contents of the early Semetic scriptures, and also to him who is not a follower of either Judaism or Christianity, styled by the Quran as '*Ahlu al-Kitab*' ( اهل الكتاب ) or "the people of the Book" (the Old and the New Testament) as distinguished from the '*Ummiyun*' or those who did not follow them or had no Book or Scripture of their own such as the pre-Islamic Arabs. When these were the different connotations of the word '*Ummi*' why is it that our scholars, both Muslims and Non-Muslims, have unitedly endeavoured to read into the word '*Ummi*' as applied to the Prophet, only the etymological sense of it or of one who can neither read nor write, and consequently styled the people of Mecca as '*Ummiyun*' or a set of illiterates?

The approbrium of illiteracy attached to them is essentially due to the term '*Ahad al-Jahilia*' or the 'Age of Ignorance' applied by the later medieval historians of Islam to the pre-Islamic period of Arab history, giving rise to fantastic views touching the pre-Islamic life of the Meccans in particular. The word '*al-Jahilia*', even as the word '*Ummi*' is not to be taken in the etymological sense of it. It should mean

only 'ignorance of the early Semetic scriptural knowledge or a style of life not conforming to the programme of living sanctioned by Revelation. The Arabs of Mecca at the advent of the Prophet were not a barbarous society, a crowd of mere illiterates, but were, on the other hand, an organised society enjoying certain civic rights and discharging certain civic duties in an organised manner, and that a fair number of them were literates. This is now made clear by a recent work of research published in Hyderabad.<sup>1</sup>

Mecca was indeed a centre of international commerce with a system of its own functioning as a clearing house for international currency and maintaining accounts in the different parts of Arabia and adjoining countries. Trade indeed was an avocation with the rich among the Meccans, both men and women, who even floated joint-stock companies. The great grandfather of the Prophet, Hashim, the most influential among the Meccans of his time, had entered into commercial treaties with Heraclius of Byzantium, the Negus of Ethiopia and the Emperor of Persia. So high a position had he among the merchant princes of his time that once the Emperor of Byzantium gave him a personal letter of introduction to the Emperor of Ethiopia.<sup>2</sup> Indeed Khadija, the future wife of the Prophet, used to send out periodically trade caravans of nearly 2000 camels laden with goods of diverse sorts.

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1. The *Economic Doctrines of Islam* by Dr. Muhammad Yusufuduin, Head of the Department of Comparative Religion and Culture. His original in Urdu has already been published. Its English version is now ready for the press.
  2. Ibn Sa'ad : *Tabaqat*, Vol. I, pp. 43-45.

With a position such as this, Mecca had become a centre of attraction for even poets, both men and women, from the different parts of Arabia, particularly Yamen and Najd, who used to hold periodical contests in versifying at Ukaz, a suburb of Mecca. So enthusiastically did the Meccans flock to these contests that the poems adjudged the best from among those recited at such gatherings, were scribed in bold hand and posted at the entrance to the Ka'aba itself. They are called *Mu'a llagat*. This entrance, may it be noted, was ordinarily utilized for the posting of important notices and announcements of public interest. Indeed, when the family of the Prophet, the Banu Hashim, were socially boycotted because of the activities of the Prophet, the announcement of boycott, according to Ibn Ishaq and Ibn Hisham, signed by all the leaders of the other families of the Quraish, was posted at the entrance of Ka'aba for every one to read and abide by the instructions given therein.<sup>1</sup> Could a society among whom all this was possible be dubbed illiterate?

Much is, no doubt, made of the following verse in the Quran to argue that the Prophet was illiterate:

وما كنت تتلوا من قبله من كتاب ولا تخطه يمينك  
إذا لارتاب المبطلون

"And thou didst not read before it (Quran) any *Kitab* (book) nor didst thou transcribe anything therefrom with thy right hand; for then, the triflers would have doubted" (the integrity of the Quranic text).<sup>2</sup>

1. Ibn Hisham : *Sirah*. Vol. I, P. 317.

2. Quran, 29 : 48.

The inference is not warranted. The '*Kitab*' in the original does not mean any book whatsoever. It means 'any of the Scriptures—the Old Testament and the New Testament', which were in languages the Prophet did not know. The fact is that there were some among the Jews who used to say that the Prophet was copying out passages from their own Scripture. The revelation comes to refute this charge by declaring that the Prophet was not conversant with the language of the early Scriptures that he could copy anything out [of them in his own hand secretly. But it certainly does not mean that the Prophet was not able to read and write in Arabic which was the language of the Quran and which was his own mother tongue.

This apart, it should be remembered that as an orphan child, the Prophet was brought up by his grandfather who occupied a leading position in Meccan society. Surely, he would not have failed to look after his grandson in a manner befitting his rank, especially when the early historians of Islam, state that he had laid great store by his grandson and looked upon him as one who would rise to an Eminence "such as had never been reached by any Arab in the past and could never be attained by any Arab in the future".<sup>1</sup> And then, would his uncle Abu Talib, himself an educated man, while giving education to his own son Ali, the future son-in-law of the Prophet, have neglected the education of the son of his elder brother entrusted to his care and allowed him to grow into an illiterate youth?

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1. *Fawaid Badaria*, P. 24.

It has now been disclosed as the result of research that, not only in Mecca but in Taif and Madina, regular schools for children were being run for boys and girls together, where the art of writing was part of the regular curriculum. In fact, the account runs that some of the children, not content sometimes with writing on their wooden tablets, used to scribe out their letters and words on the walls of the schools and that in black ink.<sup>1</sup> In an atmosphere such as this, was it possible for a child like Muhammad who was expected by his grand-father to play a great role in the history of the Arabs, to have been kept out of the company of his fellow children of Quraish who used to attend schools?

It is recorded that the Prophet prior to his marrying Khadija had been appointed as her trade agent and sent out in charge of huge caravans to attend to foreign transactions. Surely, she would not have entrusted so responsible a task to one who could not write or read or keep even simple accounts. What history has recorded is that she used to look into the accounts kept by him every time he returned from his trade journey and was glad to find that his careful transactions in foreign countries had usually brought to her nearly 100 % of profit.<sup>2</sup>

Historians have recorded that the Prophet maintained a secretariat of his own to attend to the administrative matters of the state. His own personal secretaries who attended to his correspondence with the

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1. Ibn Qutaibah : *Uyun al-Akhbar*, Vol. IV, P. 103.

2. Ibn Sa'ad : *Tabaqat*, Vol. I, pp. 43-45.

rulers of the adjoining countries were conversant with the languages of those countries. In fact, in Madina itself, arrangement had been made to teach Greek, Persian, Coptic and Abyssinian to some of the Prophet's followers who were marked out by him to work either as his secretaries or as his envoys to foreign countries.<sup>1</sup> Is it conceivable that the letters addressed by him to the rulers of these countries were sent out without his having even looked into them?

One thing, however, is clear to me and it is that the Quran does not apply the term 'ummi' to the Prophet in its etymological sense of one who has just emerged from the womb of his mother or in the applied sense of an illiterate or ignorant person. I have come across several incidents recorded in the Hadith literature which should go to refute the prevailing idea. I hope to revert to the subject at some future date and discuss it in fuller detail. For the present, I shall draw attention only to a few of them just to rouse the conscience of those who still cling to the notion that the Prophet was illiterate:

1. To begin with, I refer to the famous document relating to the truce of Hdaybiya. The treaty was to be entered into between Suhayl as representative of the hostile tribe of the Quraish and the Prophet. Ali, the son-in-law of the Prophet and the future caliph of Islam, was summoned by the Prophet to write the

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1. Masudi : *Kitab al-Tanbih wa 'al-Ashraf*, P. 285. For details see : Tabari : 'Annals of the Prophet before the Prophethood'; Ibn Hisham: 'Biography of the Prophet,' pp. 282-284.

document as dictated by him. The first sentence ran: 'This is what Muhammed, the Messenger of Allah, has agreed with Suhayl bin Amr.....'. At this Suhayl said: "If we had recognised you as the Messenger of Allah, we would not have fought against you. You are Muhammed son of Abdullah". The Prophet said: "I am Messenger of Allah and Muhammed son of Abdullah". Then he asked Ali to erase the words "Messenger of Allah". Ali said: "By Allah! I shall never erase them". Thereupon the Prophet himself took the document from Ali and wrote with his own hand "Muhammed son of Abdullah" (Muhammed bin Abdullah).<sup>1</sup> The Arabic original is فكتب يده

2. Katani, the well-known scholar of Morocco, in his work 'Kitab 'al-Taratib al-Idariya' published in 1346 Hijra, has a chapter entitled; "Instructions of the Prophet in the art of writing", in which he has given instances, on the authority of *Shifa* of Qazi Ayaz, of the Prophet having personally coached in the art of writing several young men including Zaid bin Thabit, Jabir bin Abdullah and Muawiyah.<sup>2</sup>

1. Bukhari, *Kitab al-Maghazi*, Ibn Hisham Vol. III, P. 747.

2. Katani: *Al-Taratib al-Idariya* Vol. I, P. 127. The Prophet showed Muawiyah how to apply diacritical dots to certain alphabets in the Kufi script: The original runs:

عن معاوية انه كان يكتب بين يدي رسول الله صلى الله عليه وسلم فقال له: ألقِ الدواة، وحرف القلم، وأقم الياء، وجرس السين، ولا تعور الميم، وحسن الله، ومد الرحمن وجرد الرحيم.  
(الكتاني: التراتيب الادارية ج ١ ص ١٢٧).



3. Bukhari has recorded that the Prophet once gave a confidential letter to Ali, his son-in-law, with specific instructions not to open it and note the name of the addressee until he reached a certain station several miles from where he was, and then proceed to his destination and deliver the letter to the person concerned. When so much of secrecy was observed even with Ali, surely the letter could not have been written except by the Prophet himself.<sup>1</sup>

4. The great Arab historian, Ibn Hajar al-Asqalani of the 8th Century and the famous commentator of Bukhari, while drawing attention to the controversy that was going on in his days over this issue points out, on the basis of references in the Traditions, that the consensus of opinion among the Ulema of the times, not only in West Asia but in North Africa and Sicily, was that the "Prophet knew both reading and writing".<sup>2</sup>

5. It is also recorded by Asqalani that the Prophet once asked Muawiya to take down a document in favour of Aqra bin Habis and O'ina to his dictation. In this connection, the statement of O'ina is recorded thus: "The Prophet took the document into his hand and looked into it and said: 'whatever I have dictated for you has been correctly noted down'".<sup>3</sup>

6. Ibn Abi Shaiba has recorded that the Prophet before he passed away had learnt reading and writing.

ما مات رسول الله صلى الله عليه وسلم حتى كتب وقراء

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1. For details see Bukhari, Vol. I, Kitab al-Ilm,

2. Ibn Hajar al-Asqalani: *Fath al-Bari* Vol. VII, P. 386.

3. *Fath al-Bari* Vol. VII, P. 887.

7. Referring to the traditions recorded by Anas bin Malik, the faithful attendant of the Prophet, Ramhurmuzi, Khatib al-Baghdadi and al-Ha'kim relate in the same language :

“Anas would take out his note-books and say: These are the traditions which I had heard from the Prophet and submitted for his perusal”.<sup>1</sup>

8. Ibn Abi Shaiba narrates on the authority of Abdulla bin 'Ukba bin Mas'ud: "The Prophet (Peace on him !) knew both reading and writing before he passed away".<sup>2</sup> Ujala says that he conveyed this statement to Imam Shafai and the Imam said: "He spoke the truth. I have heard numerous narrators of Hadith attesting to this fact".<sup>3</sup>

Likewise, Imam Dhabi in his *'Tazkara al-Huffaz* makes a like statement.<sup>4</sup>

9. Bukhari makes a reference to an incident in the life of the Prophet. Therein occur the words: He (the Prophet) took a paper and wrote.<sup>5</sup>

10. There are references also to the fact that in the various deeds of land-gifts given to some of his follow-

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1. Ramhurmuzi: *al-Muhadith al-Fasil* Mss. Asafia, Khatib al-Baghdadi: *Taqyid Al-Ilm* P. 95 al-Hakim al-Mustadark.

2. Ibn Abi Shaiba: *al-Mussannaf* (Mss) in (Asafia) the State Central Library, Hyderabad, & Sayidia Library, Hyderabad. Also Ibn Hajar al-Asqalani: *Fathe al-Bari* Vol: VII, P. 386.

3. Katani : *al-Taratib al-Idariya*, Vol. I - P. 113.

4. Volume - 11, P. 35, Manda.

5. Bukhari, *Bab 'Umrat al-Qaza*.

ers, the Prophet added words here and there with his own hand for the sake of clarification.<sup>1</sup>

Further references may be added. But the few which have been given here should be enough to show that the Prophet was not an 'Ummi' in the sense of an illiterate person, but that, on the other hand, he was able to read and write in Arabic.



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1. Katani: *al-Taratibul Idariya*, Vol-I P. 177. For detail see Dr. M. Hameedullah's *al-Wasa'iq al-Siyasyah*.