

The Necessity of the Development of a Public Library System in Muslim Communities: an Islamic Perspective

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Abstract

Public library is a very much essential institution for any society. The Muslim community is lagging far behind in this respect. Other nations are much advanced in their relations with public libraries. The developed countries have given much importance to the developments of their libraries which in turn enriched their nations and helped them reach the peak of glory. If we look at the developed countries we find that they have established public libraries within a kilometer. If the Muslim countries and societies follow this model, no doubt, there will come a radical change in the arena of knowledge and learning in Muslim community which will play a vital role in their overall development and will help them regain their lost glory.

Keywords: Library, Islamic mission and responsible society

Introduction:

Reading increases the thirst for knowledge and inspires people to gain more information. Man's quest for knowledge has led him to new creations, innovations and inventions. This resulted in accumulation of tremendous amount of information and creation of millions of books all over the world. This quest for knowledge knows no bounds and limits and is never in the state of completion. It has continued since the dawn of civilization and will continue to move forward as long civilization accompanies man. A library is a treasure of valuable books and academic materials for the people to use. People who are fond of reading will agree with the fact that a library is perhaps the most peaceful place on earth. In least developed country, people cannot afford a library at home or community due to their short budget. In the world, Muslims are lagging back in respect of both intellect and technology due to the dearth of academic facilities. Here I have tried to explain that huge amount of community libraries can change the present miserable condition of the Muslim world in respect of intellect and technology.

Origin of library:

Library is a Latin word, coming from 'libre'. It means 'book'. Book means the written shape of knowledge which contains a communication or a chain between ancient and modern age. Library is one of the elements of achieving of the standardization of education. "Library is older than the book, as we know it, older than the paper, older than print" (Smith, Anderson & Holland (Eds) 1980, p. 307). In ancient age, in numerous civilizations, libraries were established. In Semitic civilization¹, libraries were established in third millennium B.C. In Assyria civilization² libraries were established in 100 B.C. and in Egyptian civilization approximately in 297 B.C. Greek philosopher Plato had a personal library. The library of the

Alexandria of Egypt, by the time of the ruler Ptolemy, collected and preserved more than eight lac copies of books (Lavlo 2003, p.231). In ancient Indian civilization, there were the Nalanda university library and Takhashila university library. In the time of Muslim rule of Umayyad and Abbasid, there were hundreds and thousands of libraries in Muslim empire. Such as Bayt al-Hikma³ and Nizmamiah⁴ college libraries were the ancient heritage of the Muslims. From Bokhara of Asia to Cordova⁵ of Spain, there were the richest libraries in each and every city of Muslims. “In the Muslim world, Damascus, Baghdad and many other cities had libraries but most were destroyed by 13th century” (Shashi 1992, p.381). The caliph of Bagdad, Harun al-Rashid could purchase the valuable books in exchange of gold. The value of good book was more valuable than the value of gold to him (Morshed 2003, p. 94). These examples prove that the driving force behind that contemporary culture, education and civilization was library which was a center of attention to them.

Definition of library:

The opinions of scholars regarding both libraries and public libraries are mentioned here: Library is “a building or a room in which collections of books, tapes, newspapers, etc. are kept for people to read study or borrow” (Crowther 1996, p.678). Actually it is the store house of knowledge and it is also called the crystal of civilization. Bernard Berelson defines “public library is a social invention designed for the preservation and dissemination of certain cultural products of the nation and the community. In an age of widespread literacy, increased leisure time, and democratic responsibilities, the public library was conceived and developed to provide ready and free access to books for all the member of the community” (Berelson 1975, p.4). According to the definition of UNESCO Library is “any organized collection of printed books and periodicals or any other graphic or audio-visual materials, with a staff to provide and facilitate the use of such materials as are required to meet the informational, research, educational or recreational needs of users” (Ahmed 1998, p.18). A public library can also be distinguished from other libraries in respect of its role in providing liberal and comprehensive service, performing a wide range of functions and providing huge volume of information, education, entertainment and inspiration. Public libraries are “Those which serve the population of a community or region free of charge or for a nominal fee; they may serve the general public or special categories of users such as children, members of armed forces, hospital patients, prisoners, workers, and employees” (Kumar 1993, p.136). So, public library aims at serving the general public or special categories of the public in the community concerned.

Objectives of library:

Public library is to be considered as an instrument of social being. A library is “To assist people to contribute to the growth of knowledge to make such use of knowledge as will promote personal and social well-being” (Nair 1993, p.9). A library is to educate man, to encourage him to participate in a creative manner in community life and to promote a better understanding between individuals, groups and nations (Murison 1971, p.100). The objectives of the library, whether it is the part of school or the public library, is to provide the knowledge seekers an environment of peaceful reading with attractive readable books suiting to their needs and taste so that the reading habit is created and particularly deep rooted (Mudhol 1990, p.20). Finally, we can say that the aim of public library is to spread knowledge, education and cultural activities, by providing educational materials, especially books, free of charge.

Functions of library:

Library is a social institution. So, it has certain functions to assist, to promote and to change the society. According to Krishan Kumar, a library should provide for:

- (a) Life-long self education,
- (b) Information / documents on all subjects including local, national and international affairs to serve economic, political and social welfare,
- (c) Proper use of leisure,
- (d) Advancement of culture,
- (e) Preservation of library heritage for posterity (Kumar 1993, p.4).

Why library is needed:

All nations, except the Muslims, in the current world are studious. There are many specific reasons behind this. To erase such bad blames from the Muslim community, first step can be establishing library in the Muslim community. So, if we want to create the eagerness and demand of Islamic books among the general people, we will have to establish public libraries at villages, hospitals, stations, air ports, waiting rooms, public places and every nook and corner of Muslim community. When people spend leisure time above mentioned places, at that time they may take books and may turn over the pages and also may get inspiration to reading. Such kind of reading may help the mind of people to be loyal to education, religion, ethics and morality.

If the Muslim society wants to produce scholarly persons possessing unfathomable knowledge in all subjects, it should take effective steps to establish public libraries. The life histories of the great Islamic personalities of the Golden age of Muslims in Spain, Bagdad and Bokhara prove that, at their childhood, they were attracted to knowledge by the familial and social libraries. "In Muslim Spain there were private and public libraries in the building of which men and women, masters and slaves, kings and people, scholars and laymen all worked alike indicating the high standard of literacy and culture in Muslim Spain" (Imamuddin 1983, p.71). Having had primary thirst of knowledge fulfilled from their home and community libraries they became more and more keen to know and quench that thirst they visited other educational institutions. "Collection of books had become a fairly common national hobby in Muslim Spain and social prestige in Cordova" (Imamuddin 1983, p.55).

Library is the scale-pan of the civilization and the development of a nation. "The use of libraries for religious and moral instruction was practiced by all early civilizations" (Kumar 1993, p.10). On the basis of the numbers of the public libraries, national development and civilization can be measured. The nation, which is not broad minded, is not prosperous in wealth. For the development of mind, books and libraries are very much essential. The history of Muslim civilization in Spain and in central Asia, teaches us that in each and every family of Granada, Cordova, Bokhara and Bagdad there were libraries and tutors. The Crusaders⁶ destroyed the advancement of the Muslims in the world.

That nation, which is pioneer in respect of establishing library, is more advanced in creating its national development. We know that at the time of the rule of the Muslims, libraries were the part and parcel of family, society and any kind of social institute. "The efforts of the great humanitarians and educationists of the early and the mid-nineteenth century did not fail to show their positive results in subsequent ages" (Murison 1971, p. 54). There is a story that Ibn Sina treated a king who was sick and affected in a chronic disease when the king was recovered he offered Ibn Sina the reward of his treatment. Ibn Sina simply demanded the permission of using the library of the King's Palace as reward for the treatment.

A library can be an important place to its user. The aim of a library is to build the users as intellectual, free thinkers and the owner of wisdom. It would make and produce qualified human being. At one stage, society needs such people for the greater interest of human being. "Public libraries enrich the personal lives of individuals; individuals can become useful citizens and advance in their vocations and professions utilizing

the information stored in public libraries” (Nair 1993, p.10). So, for the interest of Islamic society and state, such people are very much needed. Here the necessity of public library is a crystal clear to us.

For various reasons, it is not possible to collect huge amount of books individually. In addition to that, books might not be easy and available anywhere to the eager readers. Only the library can make the books available to the readers. For Islamic knowledge and movement, there is no alternative to reading. Without reading books, without bearing actual knowledge; any attempt, any movement can be failed and foiled, can be nothing but a noise and confusion. For this, good qualitative books should be collected in the public libraries and should be provided to the readers. Books are the symbol of a civilization, medium or via of the supply of information. It is the compilation of the past thinking and present information. Book gives completion to human being and it excels the life and mind of human being. It also plays a vital role in developing social, economical and political condition in a country. Books enlarge the thinking of human being, flourish the faculty of understanding, and increase the depth of mind. It guides the human being on to the right way. It creates spiritual and religious animation. It also helps to build character. So traditionally, the abode of the above qualities is the library and the name of the store or centre of knowledge is also library.

The precondition, in building of the Islamic society and state is to teach ideals, values and Islamic knowledge to the new generation. In such situation, books and libraries would be the easiest way to spread and disseminate the Islamic knowledge at every nook and corner of the world, especially in Muslim community. “It serves as a cultural centre of the community bringing together people having similar interests through extension services” (Kumar 1993, p. 89). Books not only contain the knowledge and experience on the page, but also guide the nation and country to the right and certain way. “Public libraries only can help the majority of our population to adjust with the current trends, to develop correct attitudes and to be aware of the consequences of wrong policies” (Nair 1993, p.11). And library is the container or bearer of books from decade to decade, age to age.

There are large number of books that provide advice about various topics like business, health, travel, food and careers. These books serve as a great source of advice. Many people make it a point to read and go through these books before taking important decisions in their life. Thus libraries are also helpful for people who are looking for information about specific subjects. For example a person who is planning to travel to a particular place would like to read about that destination. “Public library only can bring to the common people accurate information quickly and in depth, particularly on topics of urgent concern. It has to offer the people materials and services that will help them to prosper in their respective fields of work” (Nair 1993, p.12). All kinds of people of the society should be given the facilities to enter and use the libraries irrespective of caste, creed and religion. Books should be collected on the basis of the interest of the readers, such as, half educated people, tailor, farmer, fisherman and various professionals of the society. “A public library can help in solving social problems of a society in bringing equality of education, in achieving political and social awareness. This is how, it can serve as an agent in the process of social change” (Kumar 1993, p.12). Library should be made available to everybody so that everyone can discover his / her latent talent and serve the community and country accordingly individually and collectively.

In present backward Muslim world, young generation will hold the helm of the community in future. Uncountable books should be read and studied by them for strengthening their skill and intellect. The books of famous writers published in various languages, should be collected at the libraries for the students and young generation. The western and other nations are more advanced than the Muslims because of their advancement in respect of library in their society. We are lagging behind day by day and they are advancing ahead day by day intellectually and economically. Library creates friendly environment to attract the people to reading. For this, in the developed countries thousands of people read books during travelling, staying at hospitals, synagogue, church, mosque and in waiting places and also at leisure time. If this is the

condition of Muslim community how the Muslim world would compete with western and other nations, how would it survive in future? So, if the Muslims want to survive in this competitive world with prestige, they should search knowledge and information and the source of this knowledge and information is library.

Seeing the poor and ill-fated position of Muslim community, the Muslim scholars and thinkers express dissatisfaction and sorrow. But they have also failed to take standard and effective initiative to change the present crisis of the lagging and backward Muslims. Thousands of young people are unemployed and jobless. I think if the Muslim leaders had taken steps to keep huge amount of books at the hand of the young generations, (this is too much easy task) the future of the Muslim nation would have been bright within short time. A library plays a very important role in promoting the progress of knowledge. There are many people who love reading. But they can't afford to buy books because the prices of the books are very high. So when one becomes a member of a library, he / she can borrow valuable books. Every one may get the facilities of reading, free of cost. Renaissance can be started again in the Muslim community through the library. By the study of the situations of the past and present, future can be built. Library can be the pen-bridge of the past and present. So, according to my view, collection of all kinds of books, especially science and creative books, gathered in library can be the torch-bearer of the Muslim young.

Present Muslims having little awareness; do not know what the glorious histories of the ancient Muslims were. How the ancient Muslim civilization was destroyed by Mongols, Chenghis and Halagu khan.⁷ If libraries were established inside the Muslim community, they would know the accurate past history of Muslims easily. Mutual brotherhood and sensibility could be created among the Muslims. In the collection of the books of the library, we may get the identity of the culture and civilization, rising and falling, nation and country. Only library can make communication with past, present and future people, by creating great Islamic scholars, authors, philosophers, litterateur, historians and scientists. "Public library is the only impartial agency which can place before one and all a truly balanced information store on all points of view, all lines of approach and all schools of thought" (Nair 1993, p.13). The readers may get unbelievable taste after reading their thinking and writings. Library fulfils the curiosity and quenches the thirst of knowledge. It can play a vital role in the field of education and leisure entertainment. It is a universal or public institute. The expansion of the intellectual power in man and woman can be happened through the intimacy with library. "Library is the only institution which can direct the people towards utilizing their leisure time for their own intellectual and aesthetic development and also for contributing to the happiness of society" (Nair 1993, p. 97). With the vicinity of library their wisdom increases and they feel delight and satisfaction in their activities and it raises their thinking power and then life becomes really enjoyable.

Library is a place which is above politics, social customs and principles and religious spirit also. Thus it is a democratic institution catering the need of majority of the people "Success of democratic society to a large extent depends upon an informed citizenry. It is the crucial role of public libraries to keep their public well informed so that they can exercise their rights as citizen of a democracy properly" (Kumar 1993, p.12). Its position is neutral. It can attract all kinds of people irrespective of caste, creed and culture. "The public library , a model of democracy, and its foremost agent for the integral education of the people, is the institution which conserves and organizes human knowledge in order to place it at the service of the community without distinction of profession, creed, class or race" (Murison 1971, p.100). People of different opinion can sit together inside this institution.

Human being and society are interwoven. None can be separated from the other. In the same way human beings can't move forward without thorough knowledge of the pros and cons of the social process. But it is not possible for one person to gather all kinds of existing social knowledge. In reality, the importance of library rests in here. Without library modern civil social system cannot be imagined. "Citizens have need of such opportunities for self-education at all times. The complexity and instability of life today makes the need an urgent one" (Murison 1971, p.99). The wave of modernity had started in the Muslim world since

the end of the Second World War. New generation is very much eager in education, active and excellent in skill, more cautious about the increasing demand of the competitive society. Because of this, library would play a vital role in developing the young generation socially, culturally and educationally, even in every aspect of the development of a country.

From all-walks of life, people come to library for searching of knowledge. Here, people may come in touch with cultured and scholarly persons. As a result, there occurs exchange of culture and way of thinking among the library users. The standard of judgment and development of intellect of general people can be increased by the use of library. There is no alternative way to reading, if any one wants to get clear concept about the independent life. Human being can know and convey about the practical life through achieving knowledge only. Life may get the touch of prosperity. To educate the people is a lengthy process. Library does not give formal education as it is not an alternative to existing educational institutions. Rather, it is an institution of self-education and self motivation. Only self-education can open the inner sense of human being. "Education is a life -long process. A school child learns through formal education in the class room but he can learn far more by using the library. If we recognize the importance of informal education, then library method must get its due place" (Kumar 1993, p.23). Library can play a vital role in making plan to educate the nation, to guide to the right way, to make appetizing and inspiring to nationality and nationalism.

To open the inner sight or wisdom of human being is the great work in Islam. Prophet Mohammad (s.) said that 'the ink of the pen of the scholars and the blood of the martyrs will be measured at the day of Resurrection, then the ink of the pen of the scholars will be heavy weight than the blood of the martyr' (Al as Qalani 1986, p.225). In another Hadith Prophet said that 'Sleeping with knowledge is better than the prayer with ignorance'.⁸ To know about the life, patriotism and dedication of life for the welfare of others are some of the human responsibilities. Such persons as endowed with these qualities are the wealth of nation and country. Public library can create such qualities among the human being. It is only this democratic institute which can acquaint people of all ages and all levels with diversified information. Coming to the library, readers would get the information which is unknown to them. "Public library has a great role to play in social education to prepare people for social adjustment. It provides opportunities to the people to understand social evils and the methods to control them" (Nair 1993, p.13).

What knowledge do the students require institutionally? What subjects should the syllabus comprise of? It is no doubt that the syllabus in any institution should reflect the demand of the life of human being. But in maximum cases, due to the faulty or backdated syllabus of the education board or institution, the intellect of the pupil does not grow properly. Relating to this Promoth Chowdhury⁹ wrote an excellent and much studied article in Bengali language. 'Library is more important than hospital'. So, with a view to expanding the intellect, enriching the formal education; library will have to be given due importance and position. Libraries are thus a source of entertainment and education for youngsters as well as adults. A library helps to inculcate not only the habit of reading but also a thirst for knowledge, which makes a person humble and open to new ideas throughout his / her life. The principles of library include providing such knowledge to the students as is out of their syllabus. Library is the pen-bridge between the two ages. It's a place of collection of the historical events and documents. It makes communication between highly learned or talented men of ancient and researchers, readers, educationists and writers of subsequent ages, "When it is used, the library transmits the social heritage and inculcates the values and experiences of the past into the group with a unifying effect; it enables the individuals to appraise the present trends, future values, enhances the quality of his personal life, and provides a means for climbing the social ladder" (Murison 1971, p.554). So, in the field of searching knowledge, there is no alternative to library.

Bangladesh is a well-known country in the Muslim world. In this country the pupil gets little or less facilities to become readers under the existing education system. Here, the students can't come closer to the

library as they can to the syllabus. The pupil achieves literacy but not knowledge. They become literate but not readers. In educational institution, though they are acquainted with text-books, library remains unfamiliar and neglected institute to them. In Japan, every student of every school must take away books to their home from their school library compulsorily and guardians should give testimony or remark in the student's diary whether the books are read or not. Examination is taken on the studied or pursued books. Through a competition, best readers are rewarded by the authority yearly. It is the matter of sinister fate that we could not be book-lover nation. Thus with various differences we have become a weak nation in the world. "The authority should give priority to the development of libraries and should secure sufficient budgets for information products, operation and services. The library or information centre should be considered as a vital factor for national development" (Munshi 2005-2006, p. 53).

Physical sickness can be removed by the treatment of physicians. But in case of the removing of the psychological diseases, there is need for taking treatment. In this case, library also can play a role. The books of amusement and entertainment can help to cure physically and mentally challenged people as well as other patients. "Elderly poor and handicapped persons can also be served by it" (Kumar 1993, p.89).

A library is very useful for rural youths too. If they take to reading they will be able to refrain from evil habits such as loitering and gambling. There are not only books, but also newspapers, magazines, periodicals and government gazette in a library. Library can help to root out terrorism, extremism and superstition from the society. The ignorance or blind idea about the religion creates chaotic in the society. Especially, in Indian sub-continent, religious extremism reached at the extreme point. In this situation, library can keep a revolutionary example for the welfare of the society. It can eradicate the evils of the society.

Conclusion:

In view of the above facts it is apparent that a library is a very important place in the Muslim society. It renders a great service to the society. It plays a vital role in the development of any society by enhancing the standard of education and academic research. Libraries are also warehouses of large number of books that are great sources of entertainment for us. Fiction books, which include various genres like comedy, thriller, suspense, horror or drama, are tremendously popular within readers of varying age groups. If we want to build a knowledge based society, If we want to see socially valued person, honest or ideal person, morality or ethics based society, patriotic feelings in the people, competition with the developed country, rescue of the looted and entirely ruined glory of Muslims; we will have to establish library in each and every Muslim community, even in the family; like the Muslims of Spain and Bagdad in Medieval ages.

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¹ “A group of people who speak related Semitic Languages and who share and Middle Eastern origin. Although they may have physical characteristics in common. Such as swarthy color and stocky build, they are a language linked –group and not a racial group. They include the Arabs, a large number of Ethiopians, the Akkadians of ancient Babylonia, the Assyrians, Canaanites, Phoenicians, Syrians and Hebrews.” [William D. Halsey & Emanuel Friedman (editors) (1986), Merit Students Encyclopedia, Volume:, 16, New York :Macmillan Educational company, P., 515]

² “An ancient Near Eastern area whose inhabitants built one of the great empires of pre Roman times. The Assyrians were probably of Semitic origin. They were the people of the god Ashur, Ossur whose name was also name of their first major city. The Assyrian Empire consisted of Babylonian, Phoenicians, Aramaeans, Hittites, Hurrians, Hebrews and Egyptian. The greatest period of the empire lasted from 745 B.C. to 612 B.C. At its peak it extended north to the Caucasus, east to the land of the Medes, south into Egypt and West into Asia Minor. When it fell, the empire was divided between the Babylonians and the Medes.” [William D. Halsey & Emanuel Friedman (editors) (1986), Merit Students Encyclopedia, Volume: 16, New York :Macmillan Educational company. P. 311]

³ . The first institution for the higher scientific studies among the Arab was Bayt al-Hikmah, a combination of a library, academy and translation bureau, founded on the bank of the Tigris at Bagdad by Harun al-Rashid in 830 A.C. (Imamuddin, S.M. (1983), Some Leading Muslim Libraries of the World, Dhaka: Islamic Foundation Bangladesh p.25)

⁴ . Nizam-ul-Mulk, the prime minister of Saljuk, established a chain of madrasahs at Bagdad, Basrah, Mousul and Ispahan. The most famous of these colleges was that of Bagdad. The Nizamiah of Bagdad was founded in 457/1065. The student of it is Shaykh Sadi. The teacher of it is philosopher al-Ghazali. The library attached to the Nizamiyah College had magnificent collections. It was a very rich library having valuable and magnificent collections although the number of book is not known. It survived the catastrophe which befell the city of Bagdad during Halagu’s capture in 1258 and later invasions of the Tartars to be finally merged with her sister institution Mustansariyah in 1393 two years after the capture of Bagdad by Timmur. (Imamuddin, S.M. (1983), Some Leading Muslim Libraries of the World, Dhaka: Islamic Foundation Bangladesh, p.27-28)

⁵ . There were several public libraries and mosque libraries in Spain, there had been 70 public libraries in Cordova during the time of Hakam-ii. According to Ribera, there were a number of mosques in Cordova which had libraries for the use of student. (Imamuddin, S.M. (1983) Some Leading Muslim Libraries of the world , Islamic Foundation Bangladesh, Dhaka, , p.53, see more Bibliotheca Arabic-hispana escurialensis, 11,p.71)

⁶ . In Spain, Syria, Palestine and in parts of Moslim Africa, the Crusaders zealously destroyed many Muslim institutions. During the recapture of Spain from the Moors, Most of the Spanish libraries were either destroyed or the valuable volumes were carried away by their retreating owners. This happened in Cordova, Granada, Seville and elsewhere in Spain where there were great libraries. (Dey, Madhab

Chandra, (2005) "Decline and fall of the Medieval Muslim universities and libraries", Suraiya Begum,(Ed) *Libraries and information systems in the society*, Dhaka: Jhingaphul, p.37)

⁷ . "The final blow to the Muslim universities and the librarians was hurled by the Mongols. The Mongol invasions came in three successive phases. The first raid was made by infamous Chenghis Khan who between 1218 and 1220 A.D. swooped upon the Muslim empire with inhuman speed. Samarkand, a 500 year old Muslim city was destroyed with her educational institutions and libraries. The ten famous libraries of Merv, two in mosques, and the rest in colleges, were leveled to the ground. Bokhara, another city of Muslim culture met the same fate. Of all the Mongol raids, the most dangerous was the one made by Halagu khan in 1258. Bagdad, Queen of the East was sacked and burnt with all her buildings and institutions. By the time 36 public and hundreds of private ones were the destroyed. "So many books were thrown into the Tigris River, according to one writer, that they formed a bridge that would support to a man horseback. At that time, Mongols destroyed a wonderful library of magic". (Dey, Madhab Chandra (2005), "Decline and fall of the Mediaeval Muslim universities and libraries", Suraiya Begum, (Ed) *Libraries and information systems in the society*, Dhaka: Jhingaphul, pp.43-44] and see also more Johnson ED, Harris MA, *History of libraries in the western world*, Metuchen: Scarecrow Press, 1976:91-92 /Thompson JW. *The Mediaeval library*, Chicago: University of Chicago press, 1939:355)

⁸ . Al-Ferdous Bi-mithuril Khitab, Vol.4, Hadith No.6732, (Beirut: Darul Kutub al Elmiyah, (1st edition. 1986), p.247

⁹ . Chwdhury, Promoth (1868-1946), who was born in Pabna under undivided Bengal of Indian Sub-Continent. The title of his famous article is "Boe Pora" (to read book), which was included as curriculum syllabus in S.S.C & H.S.C since the Pakistan period up to now.

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