Compilation of Hadith

Hadith literature is an important source of the history of Islam. Its advent, expansion and fundamental teachings, as well as of the life and traditions of Mohammad which the Sahabah of the Muhammad (peace be upon him) preserved from the very beginning, and which, during the subsequent years attained a permanent branch of the knowledge. Some other branches did also emerge for the scrutiny and verification of this material. Among these ramifications of Islamic sciences, Usul al-Hadith (Principles of Scrutiny) and Asma al-Rijal (Narrators’ Who’s Who) are exclusively Islamic in character. These methods of criticism assured a high and sound standard of Hadith compilation that was quite unknown to the followers of other religions.

There are sufficient evidences to believe that the Hadith compilation had started during the lifetime of Muhammad (peace be upon him). Imam Abu Dawud has mentioned different Ahadith in this regard. One example is mentioned below.

‘Abdullah bin Amr said: “I used to write everything which I heard from the Messenger of Allah. I intended (by it) to memorize it. The Quraysh prohibited me, saying ‘Do you write everything that you hear from him, while the Messenger of Allah is a human being (Bashr), he speaks in anger and pleasure?’ Therefore, I stopped writing, and mentioned it to the Messenger of Allah. He pointed with his finger to his mouth and said: ‘Write, by Him in whose hand my soul lies, only right (Haqq) comes out from it’” (Sunan Abu Dawud).

We also find some equally reliable evidences to confirm that Muhammad (peace be upon him), and later on his Sahabah did not encourage those who wanted to compile Hadith in a book form, as a precautionary step, lest the believers should confuse the Holy book and the sayings of Muhammad (peace be upon him) as the Jews and Christians had done. The Qur’an had also impeached Jews and Christians for interpolating in their Holy Scriptures. The Messenger Muhammad (peace be upon him) and his successor Caliphs apprehended lest Muslims should follow the example of the Jews and the Christians in attributing too much importance to the Hadith collection, nevertheless, their apprehensions did not prevent the followers from preserving the spoken word of the Messenger of Allah and transmitting it to posteriors.

Compilation of Hadith in a book form had become a known practice even during Muhammad’s (peace be upon him) lifetime. We are told that ‘Ali bin Abi Talib had compiled a
small book containing Traditions of the Muhammad (peace be upon him). ‘AbdAllah bin ‘Amr bin al-‘As had also collected by permission of the Muhammad (peace be upon him), some traditions in a book form which he named as al-Sahifa al-Sadiqa. Hadhrat Abu Hurayrah had also compiled Hadith in written form.

The Righteous Caliphs were not generally in favour of committing the Traditions of the Muhammad (peace be upon him) to writing. Hadhrat Abu Bakr was amongst those who liked not to narrate the Hadith. When he became Caliph, he was over busy in solving various problems faced by the Ummah, but in spite of that, he thought that he should write down the Hadith he had heard from Rasul Allah. Therefore, he wrote down five hundred Ahadith.

Imam Zahbi has quoted Hadhrat ‘Ai’sha saying my father Abu Bakr asked to get all those Hadith which he had written, and then he asked for fire and burnt that document.

Hadrat ‘Umar was also reluctant in writing Hadith. Urwa bin al-Zubayr reports that ‘Umar wanted to compile Ahadith and had convened a meeting of Sahabah in order to seek their advice; although the majority voted for compilation but ‘Umar vetoed their decision.

“I was contemplating to write down the traditions of the Messenger Muhammad [peace be upon him]” he pronounced before general audience of believers, “but in the meantime I recalled that People of the Book, committed to writing books other than the revealed scriptures, and consequently they left behind the Holy Scriptures and stuck to their own compilations. By God, I shall never mix the Book of Allah with other human works” and ultimately he gave up the idea.

The role of Hadrat ‘Uthman in compiling Qur’an is well known but in Hadith he was extremely cautious. Hadrat ‘Uthman used to say: “It does not stop me from narrating Hadith of Rasul Allah that I remember less Hadith than others, but it is due to the fact that I have heard from Rasul Allah that one who attributes that thing to me which I have not said should consider his abode in Hell.” (Musnad Ahmad)

It was during the period of Tabi’in the activity of compiling Hadith started to gain the momentum. Hadrat ‘Umar bin Abd al-Aziz wrote a letter to a famous Muhaddith of the time during his regime, as quoted in Sahih Bukhari:
“Umar bin Abd al-Aziz wrote to Abu Bakr bin Hazam that he should keep an eye on the Hadith of Rasul Allah and write them because I fear fading away of knowledge (Hadith) and death of ‘Ulama and also you should not accept any narration except that of Rasul Allah and you spread knowledge as Knowledge is not wasted but only if it is kept hidden. (Sahih Bukhari)

Hadrat ‘Umar bin Abd al-Aziz wrote similar letters to other Muhaddithin and then sent their compilations to other places.

Hadrat Abu Hurayrah is reported to have dictated traditions to his students who committed them to writing. Among them Hammam bin Munabbah was one. He compiled a book entitled al-Sahifa al-Sahiha of which the manuscripts are found in the libraries of Berlin and Damascus. Dr. Hamid Allah of Paris has done good research work on them. Imam Zahri had also compiled Hadith about which Salih bin Kisan says:

“I and Zahri met together and we used to collect Hadith, then we decided to write them and we wrote all that what we heard is from Rasul Allah, and then we decided to write the narrations of Sahabah. I said that I would not write as that was not Sunnah, Zahri replied that they were also Sunnah and he wrote; he succeeded and I wasted.” (Musnaf Abd al-Razzaq)

Ma’mar bin Rashid, a disciple of Hammam also compiled a book entitled Jami, ‘manuscripts of which are in the Ankara University Library and in Istanbul.

Some of the important Hadith books that were written during this period are: Kitab Khalid bin Maydan; Kutb Hasan al-Basri; Kutb Muhammad al-Baqr; Kitab Hakam bin ‘Utba; Kitab ‘Umar bin Abd al-Aziz.

The most frequent work on the Compilation of Hadith literature took place during the period of Taba Tabi’in (Followers of the Followers). This period in the history of collection of Hadith is being regarded as golden period for Hadith compilation. In this period the not only Hadith were compiled but also the sayings of the Sahabah and their followers as well. It was the period in which famous and important books on the Hadith were written. Principles were laid down to differentiate a Sahih Hadith from a fabricated one. In this period, not only unwritten traditions were collected but also written traditions were rearranged in different chapters and under various topics. Six valuable books are the main outcome of this period and these are: Sahih
Bukhari of Imam Bukhari; Sahih Muslim of Imam Muslim; Sunan of Abu Dawud; Sunan of Tirmidhi; Sunan of Nasa’i; Sunan of Ibn Maja