

## The Problem of “Where”: the Passport Sign!

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### ABSTRACT

For many scientometrics studies, say to assess contribution of nations to science production, it is not only important to figure out who did what, but is also important to determine where one is from. While providing answer to this question is not difficult for contemporary researchers, the origin of some ancient scholars is sometimes not completely clear for many reasons including historical obscurity. Several factors including the birth place, burial place, language, *etc.* are among important factors to be considered in determining the origin of a person, but we show that none of these factors are very helpful. We believe that the key factor to be considered is the self-expressed answer of the person if he would have been asked “where are you from?”—the passport sign!

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### The Problem of “Where”: the Passport Sign!

Although “we are all brothers under the skin,” no matter where we are from, sometimes for correcting the records, say for historical or scientometrics concerns, we have to skin people and dissect them to find out where they are from. As an example, for determining the contribution of nations to scientific enterprise, we not only have to solve the problem of “who” to see who did what,<sup>1</sup> but should also know where a certain scholar is from. Although for contemporary researchers, this could be found easily, for some ancient scientists, for historical obscurity and lack of solid criteria, it is not always easy to answer this question. For example, some people of Uzbekistan believe that Avicenna is an Uzbek probably since his birth place is now in their country,<sup>2</sup> some people of Tajikistan claim that he is

Tajik perhaps since his mother, *Setāreh*, was a Tajik; some Arabs believe that he is Arab possibly because almost all of his manuscripts were written in Arabic and also his name, *Hossein*, is originally Arabic;<sup>3</sup> and almost all Iranians believe that Avicenna is Persian probably since he is buried in Iran and took over several ministerial and administrative positions during the *Sāmānid* and *Āle Buye* reigns.<sup>4</sup> But, where is he really from?

The geography of many countries as well as their political boundaries have been changed largely over time. Therefore, relying on geographic places such as birth or burial place though might give some clues, would not be acceptable. As an example, the birth place of Avicenna was near *Bokhārā* which is now in Uzbekistan, but then it was the Capital of *Sāmānid* dynasty in Iran.<sup>5</sup> We neither can rely on the place where somebody lives to determine where he is from. Many scholars emigrated to and lived a long period of their lives in a country other than their motherland. Many of them, however, were not treated as the citizen of that country.

The language is also not an acceptable indicator; many countries in the world are speaking and writing in a same language (*e.g.*, US and UK or Arab countries), while there are several countries whose people are speaking and writing in different languages (*e.g.*, Iran and Belgium). Furthermore, scientists usually write in the science language of their

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own era to reach more audience. Today, English is the *lingua franca* of science and most of the scientific articles are written in English (even by non-native speakers). Writing a book or article in English does not mean that the author's mother tongue is also English. English, however, has not always enjoyed its current position as the language of science and other languages like Greek, French and Arabic once played this role. Many of poems of *Iqbal-e Lāhori* (Allama Iqbal), the great poet of Pakistan, is in Persian, but none of Persians can claim that he is Iranian. Therefore, we neither can rely on the language one writes their articles in to decide who belongs to where.

We neither can rely on names completely, as several names are common in many countries. Currently, we commonly use numerous Arabic names in Iran. This certainly roots in history of Iran. For example, the father of Avicenna was *Abdollah* which is a pure Arabic name, but since long ago — after Islam entered Iran — such names as well as many other Arabic words came into our language, Persian.

But, if none of these works, what should be the criteria for identifying the country or nation one belongs to? The nationality is clearly stated in the passport of each person, and therefore not mentioning the dual citizenship recently becomes acceptable by some countries, what a person claims as appeared in their passport application, would be a good criterion of their citizenship. However, unfortunately, none of the ancient scientists had passport. But, what would have they responded, if they were asked "where are you from?" We think this self-expressed answer is the key to our problem of "where." In answering this question, our scientist would have certainly considered all the important factors; the geographical and political boundaries, the language(s), emigration, *etc.* to answer where they belong to.

If we accept this approach, then the geographical and political boundaries that determine the birth or burial place of a person, their name, and the language a person spoke or wrote in should be examined at the geographical, historical and cultural setting at the time of their life and certainly not at the present time.

Assuming this proposition, as an example, now let us examine where Avicenna was from. When Avicenna was alive, he had no idea that his birth place, then near the Capital of *Sāmānīd* dynasty in Iran would once become part of an independent

country, Uzbekistan, and therefore in answering our question he would never have answered "Uzbekistan" since he even had never heard about that country. Therefore, he believed that he was born in Iran. Burial place is also not useful to reach the answer to our question, as no one knows for sure where their body will be buried.

Avicenna's mother name, *Setāreh*, was a Persian name meaning "star." Now, many Iranian girls have the same first name. Therefore, Avicenna's mother tongue was most likely Persian. Although he wrote most of his seminal manuscripts in Arabic, the *lingua franca* of science in that era, he also wrote many manuscripts in Persian. One of the important examples is *Danishnama-yi 'Ala'i* meaning the Book of Knowledge for 'Ala' *al-Dawla*.<sup>4</sup> He also had many poems in Persian and I believe that his first language was Persian, although as mentioned above, the language should not be considered as a criterion since in many countries, particularly large ones, talking in various languages is not uncommon. Avicenna also took over several ministerial and administrative positions in Iranian dynasties.<sup>5</sup> Assignment to such prestigious positions has not been reported so far for non-Iranians. For all these reasons, we believe that if Avicenna applied for passport he would have claimed his nationality as "Iranian."

Although great scholars belong to all human beings, we believe that the presented approach can be used to solve the "problem of where" for scientometrics purposes.

The arguments stated above are true for all ancient people including many eminent scholars like Rhazes, Khayyam and Anvari. Although finding where they are from is very clear for some of them, for others we need more scrutiny.

**Conflicts of Interest:** Authors are Iranians.

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