



India as Depicted in Arabic Literature: A Study

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Abstract:

India's contacts with the Arabs date back to the most ancient times. In the beginning these contacts were in the form of commercial relations. A number of factors combined to make ancient Arabs daring seafarers and pioneers of maritime trade. The surface of the Arabian Peninsula is mostly desert with a narrow margin of habitable land. When the number of its inhabitants increased beyond the capacity of the land to support them, they were naturally led to seek shelter outside of the peninsula. Being encircled by the sea on the east, west and South, they first migrated northward to the fertile valley of the Nile, In the course of time they learned to sail the sea, and established their colonies in the nearby and far-off corners of the world. This made them bold adventurers and skilled navigators. In this way they remained masters of the sea for a long period of time both before and after the rise of Islam.

Key Words: Arabian Peninsula, Islam, Nile, Arabs.

Introduction:

The Pre-Islamic Arabs, especially the South Arabians, used to voyage fearlessly in the Arabian Gulf, the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean many centuries before the birth of Christ, despite the fact that their ships were in the preliminary stage which they propelled with small oars called al-murdi (pole). They used triangular sails also. When their ships using these sails entered the Mediterranean Sea after its conquest by them, the same sails were adopted by the sailors of that sea also in place of the four-sided sails used by them until that time.¹ Thus by virtue of being active navigators, they became pioneers of maritime trade, and acted as commercial intermediaries between the East and the West, following which sea-traffic between the ports of India and East Arabia was very early established, several thousand years ago as long back as the tenth century BC Arab merchants used to visit the Indian coast and transport the products of this country, especially spices and rare animals (apes and peacocks) to Oman. From there they would go overland to the Arabian Gulf, whence they were shipped to Egypt and Syria for the use of the Pharaohs and grandees.² And from there they were conveniently taken into European markets.

Discussion:

There is sufficient historical evidence to show that the North Arabians also took an active part in maritime activities. According to al-Tabari, there were two important centres of



maritime trade in the northern peninsula. They were al-Ubullah on the eastern coast and al-Batra on the south-eastern coast of the peninsula near the Gulf of Aqabah. In the pre-Islamic period, al-Ubullah was named as Thaghr al-Hind (frontier of India) because of its close maritime contacts with India.³

Commodities from Europe were also brought to India by the same enterprising Arab merchants. It is worth mentioning in this context that in ancient times India was ahead of the world in science, technology, philosophy, and wisdom literature, due to which its exports were highly prized in foreign markets in those days both in the West and in the East. Indian Kapas called qutn in Arabic became cotton in the English language, while the sword manufactured in India became as proverbial in Arab lands as the Arabian horses in the court of Harshvardhan (d. circa Ad 647), whose reign marked a transition from the ancient to the medieval period. The swords made in India had the reputation of being very strong, supple and sharp. No wonder, the Pre-Islamic Arab poets prided themselves on being in possession of the swords manufactured in India. Tarafah Bin-al- 'Abd, a renowned pre-Islamic poet boastfully expressed this point, saying:

"I have sworn that a sharp double-edged Indian sword will always remain suspended by my side, and that I will never part company with it."⁴

Besides, the Arabs imported from India cloths, Indigo, shals, muslins, pepper, sandalwood, teakwood, diamonds, horns of rhinoceros, ivory, aromatics, cardamom, cinnamon, camphor, mangoes, lemons, oranges, coconut, sugar-candy, etc. As regards the main commodities which they brought to India included iron, silver, lead, wine, rose-water, saffron, dates, horses, etc.

Description of the Topic:

The Arab merchants were the main captains of the trade route between India and Europe, the greatest highway of trade in the world. They went right up to China via Bengal and Assam. They also reached China by sea by sailing on the Indian Ocean right up to the Pacific Ocean. It is noteworthy that ancient Chinese documents record the entry of myrtle and Jasmine in China through the Arab traders as far back as 300 AD.⁵

One important result of these Indo-Arab commercial relations was that the Indians and their rulers had a great regard for the Arab merchants, mainly because their trading activities brought them wealth and prosperity, due to which India had become a country of fabulous and exotic riches.

Secondly, these Arab merchants had built their permanent settlements on the Malabar Coast and in the nearby territories which kept the Indo-Arab relations alive and played a laudable



role in the diffusion of Indian cultural heritage in Arabia and outside both in the East and the West.

Further, the early Arabs had such a great fascination for this country that they named some of their daughters as Hind. For instance, mother of the renowned pre-Islamic Arab heroes *Bakr* and *Taghlib*, daughter of king Nu'man, Hind, and wife of King *Mundhir* - they were all named as Hind. Besides, an idea of the antiquity of Indo-Arab relations may also be drawn from the statement of *Swami Dayanand* saying in his *Satyarath Prakash* that some Indians knew Arabic language as early as in the days of the *Mahabharata*. The story goes that when the *Kauravas* tried to destroy the *Pandavas* by putting and burning them in a house of sealing wax, *Vidyurji* prewarned *Yudhishtira* in Arabic and the latter answered back in the same language.⁶

After the rise of Islam when the Arabs became united and emerged as a powerful conqueror of nations, these early Arab traders were the first to carry with them the message of Islam to India, much earlier than the establishment of the Arab colony in Sind in 712 AD. They built their houses and mosques and practiced their religious rites freely. It was through these Arab traders that a constant stream of the influence of Islam flowed in upon the Western coast of India. As a result, large numbers of Arab-Muslim merchants had settled in India and Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) long before the Arab conquest of Sind.

One important impact of the socio-religious life of these early Arab settlers was that the local people were profoundly impressed by their simplicity of life, honesty, their zeal for the new faith, and the principles of world-wide brotherhood preached and practiced by them. These merchants settled down and even inter-married, giving rise to such communities as the Kokanai Muslims of Bombay and Mopals of Malabar. The Arabs continued to come and settle in India till the opportunity for territorial conquest presented itself to them in the reign of Caliph Abdul Malik Bin Marwan (685-705). When the Arab traders and travelers could not be protected from the attacks of robbers and pirates by the rulers of Sind. The Arab rulers took necessary measures to ensure their safety. It is related that the king of Ceylon sent a party of widows and orphan daughters, whose guardians were traders and had died there, to please Hajaj, the governor of Abdul Malik. But the ship carrying them was attacked by some pirates at Dibul, the chief medieval harbour of Sind situated at the mouth of the Indus. When the sad news reached Hajaj, he seriously thought of occupying the coast town of Sind, and sent an army of 6000 soldiers together with large supplies of war materials including even needles and thread under the command of his son-in-law Muhammad Bin Qasim, a young man of seventeen. The army marched along the Persian Coast, reached the valley of Indus, and laid siege to the fort of Dibul. The Arab army met the forces of Dahir. Ultimately Dahir



was defeated and killed, and the whole pain of the Indus Valley came under the direct sway of the Arabs, who ruled it for about three hundred years.

Henceforth, commercial and cultural contacts between India and the Arab world began to grow consistently. Travelers came to and fro and embassies were exchanged. The growth of Indo-Arab relations during this period was not confined to the territory of Sind alone. As in pre-Islamic days, it extended to the Southern States of India also. Travelers and missionaries continued to come and preach their religion. They were welcomed and honoured by the local rulers and their subjects. The Arab historians, who visited India in the ninth and tenth centuries, are full of praise for the cordial relations that existed between these Arab settlers and the indigenous population. *Al-Mas'udi*, the famous historian, has paid a high tribute of praise to Raja Balhari (the ruler of Gujrat) for his just and generous treatment of Muslims as mentioned below:

“There is none among the rulers of Sind and Hind who in his territory respects Muslims like Raja Balhari. In his territory Islam is honoured and protected. And for them mosques and Congregational mosques, which are always full, have been built for offering prayers five times. Every one of these kings’ rules for fifty years or more. It is the general belief of the people of his kingdom that the lives of these kings are very long, because they administer justice and honour the Muslims”,⁷

Another important channel, through which Islam entered into the hearts of the masses of this country was that of Sufis and saints, who followed wherever the Muslim army settled. Abu Hafs, a Muhaddith (Traditionist), was the first Muslim saint and scholar who came to Sind where he breathed his last in 160 A.H.⁸ In the tenth century the renowned Sufi-saint al-Hallaj made a voyage to India and went back overland by way of northern India and Turkistan. In the eleventh century Baba Riham came to Broach from Baghdad with a company of dervishes.⁹

After the invasion of Mahmud Ghaznawi in about 1000 AD, a good number of men of learning poured into India. Of them the name of *al-Biruni* is the most illustrious. Besides, *Ali Bin Uthman al-Hujwiri*, the author of *Kashf al-Mahjub*, came from Ghaznah and settled in Lahore. Fariduddin Attar the celebrated author of *Tadhkirat al-Auliya* and Khwaja Mu'inuddin Chishti visited India in the twelfth century. Among other notable saints who visited India or came to reside here, mention may be made of Sayyid Shah Mir, son of Abdul Qadir Jilani, Qutbuddin Bakhtiyar Ka'ki Baha'uddin Zakariya, Jalaluddin Surkhposh, and Muhammad Ghawth of the Shattari order. By their personal contact and influence they spread the ideas of Islamic philosophy and *Tasawwuf* in different parts of the country.¹⁰ The Muslim saints and Sufis found in India a fertile ground for their activities. They drew adherents from



all communities and classes of people. They were honoured by both rulers and their subjects. Thanks to their preaching and personal contacts with the masses, Islam spread throughout the length and breadth of this country.

The keen interest taken by the Arabs in India is fully reflected in their writings on it. Books of the Arab writers and travelers right from merchant Sulaiman in the ninth century to Ibn Battutah of the fourteenth display the admiration, love and affection of the Arabs for this country and matters related to it. Among prominent Arab writers on India, mention may be made of the following : Merchant Sulaiman (9th century), who undertook several voyages to India and China and author of his travel diary known as *Akhbar al-Sind w-al-Hind* which was later edited and printed by Langles in Paris in 1811 under the title *Silsilat al-Tawarikh*; Ahmad Bin Yahya al-Baladhuri (d. 892), author of the books *Futuh al-Buldan* and *Ansab al-Ashraf (Lineages of the Nobles)*; Al-Ya'qubi (d. 900), author of *Kitab al- Buldan* which contains a section on India also; Ibn Khurdadbhih (d. 912), director of the post and intelligence services and author of *Kitab al-Masalik w-al-Mamalik*; A- Mas'udi (d.956), author of *Muruj al-Dhahab (The Meadows of Gold)*; Al-Jahiz (d. 969), author of *al-Bayan w-al Tabyin and Fakhr al-Sudan 'alaal-Bidan*; Abu Zayd Hasan al-Sirafi (10th century), who revised and supplemented the diary of his predecessor Sulaiman; Al-Istakhri (10th century), author of the famous geographical work *Masalik al -Mamalik* which contains colored maps for each country; Ibn Hawqal (fl.943-77), author of *al-Masalik w-al-Mamalik*; Al-Biruni (973-1050), author of *Kitab al-Hind*, a monumental work of his comprehensive and scientific study of contemporary Indian life, thought and culture; Sa'id al-Andalusi (1029-70), author of *Tabagat al-Umam (Classification of Nations)*; Al-Idrisi (1100-'1166) author of *Nuzhat al-Mushtaq fi Ikhtiraq al-Afaq*; Yaqut al-Hamawi (1179-1229), author of *Mu'jam al-Buldan*; Ibn Battutah (d. 1377), author of *Tuhfat al-Nuzzar fi Ghara 'ib al-A msar wa Aja'ib al-Asfar (Observers' Accounts of the Peculiarities of Cities and Marvels of Voyages)*; Al-Qalqashandi (d. 1418), author of *Subh al-A'sha*; and several others.

A perusal of the writings of Arab authors on India makes it quite clear that they had a very high opinion about this country and its inhabitants. They unanimously included the Indians among six highly civilized nations of the world, the other nations being the Arabs, Chinese, Romans and Greeks. Some selected extracts from their writings are given below to substantiate this point.

Conclusion

From what has been discussed above, it is clear that the impression one gets of the Indians through Arabic literature of the Middle Ages is one of a wise and intelligent people gifted with many virtues. The Arabs also looked upon them as a people seriously concerned with the task of attaining spiritual enlightenment by controlling their desires and performing Yogic



exercises. The age-old affection shown by the Arabs towards this country has been beautifully expressed by an Arab poet named Abu Di'l'a, who had settled in Sind in the 3rd or 4th century AH, in a patriotic song which he composed in refutation of the viewpoints of some critics of India regarding its multiple excellences and products.

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