

Early Muslims and the Arab Rule in the Indian Sub-continent

1.1 Early Settlements in the Coastal Regions of India

Thousands of years before the dawn of Islam in Arabian Peninsula, the Arab traders had enjoyed commercial relations with the Indians, particularly those inhabiting the coastal areas of India. These traders used to carry Indian goods such as spices to Europe via Syria and Egypt, and carried the goods from the European markets to India, East Indies (present Indonesia), China and Japan.¹ In pre-Islamic days, these Arab traders had also established their settlements for commercial purposes in many coastal towns and cities of Malabar Coast. After the dawn of Islam in Arabian Peninsula, the commercial activities of the Muslim Arabs in Indian Ocean and Bay of Bengal continued. Meanwhile, new colonies of these traders, sailors and seafarers kept on mushrooming on the eastern and western coasts of India.

Historical evidence suggests the presence of such settlements and colonies long before the Arab conquest of Sindh and Gujarat in 711. A few Companions of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) had settled in Balochistan. Tamil Muslims claim to be the oldest Muslims in India. These earliest Tamil Muslims call themselves Lappai, Marakkayar, Malumikal, and Nayinar. There were Muslim settlements in Kanyakumari district, which date from the seventh century.² The Arab Muslims had their settlements on the Malabar Coast as well about the end of the seventh century, and in Sarandip (Ceylon or Sri Lanka) as early as the beginning of the eighth century. Important ports where Muslim settlements were established included coastal towns in Gujarat region named Khambayat (now known as Cambay) and Honawar in the Gulf of Cambay, and Seymore (modern Chaul) near Bombay. In addition to the Indian Ocean, the Arabs had extended their trade navigation to the Bay of Bengal, and commercial activities along the entire coast of Bengal and Burma, from where they carried their trade goods to the islands of Malaysia and Indonesia. Some of the Arab traders had settled near the coastal region of Chittagong in East Bengal as well.

1.2 Military Expeditions in the North-western Peripheral Regions of India under the Pious Caliphs and the Early Umayyads

After the wake of Islam in Arabia, the State of Madinah founded by Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) (b. 569-d. 632) underwent major territorial expansion after his demise. During the reign of the second Caliph of Islam, 'Umar (r. 634-44), the 'Caliphal State' witnessed the first wave of expansion in the wake of conflict with Byzantine Empire in the north-west, and Sassanian Empire in the north-east, whereby large areas in Syria, Iraq and Persia were annexed. Towards the close of the reign of Caliph 'Umar, in 644, a military commander named Hakam ibn 'Amr Taghlibi conquered Makran, which included the vast areas of what is nowadays a part of Balochistan.³ Thus, it was during the Pious

¹ Saiyyid Sulayman Nadvi, *Arab wa Hind kay Ta'illuqat* (Karachi: Karimsons Publishers, 1976), 6.

² For details, see Mattison Mines, *The Warrior Merchants: Textiles, Trade, and Territory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984).

³ Muhammad Shibli Naumani, *Al-Faruq--Sawanih Umri-'i Hazrat Umar Faruq* (Lahore: Sajjad Publishers, 1960), 217-18.

Caliphate, that Makran, which lay on the western fringes of India, came under the political sway of the Arab Muslims.

In addition, Uthman ibn Abi al-‘As Thaqafi, the Governor of Bahrayn and Oman, sent a fleet to the coastal regions of Thanah (near Bombay) and Broach (in Gulf of Cambay) via Oman under the command of his brother Hakam ibn Abi al-‘As Thaqafi. But this naval expedition was sent without the permission of the reigning Caliph ‘Umar, who, upon hearing this, forbade undertaking naval expeditions for the time being. The Governor of Bahrayn also sent one expedition to Deul, a port in Sindh, under his brother Mughirah ibn Abi al-As Thaqafi. Nonetheless, the purpose of these two expeditions was not territorial subjugation and annexation;⁴ rather they were meant to prevent their rulers from helping the Persians against the Muslim armies.

During the reign of the third Caliph, ‘Uthman (r. 644-56), an important cantonment in the region bordering Sindh and Balochistan, named Qandabil (presently known as Gandava, and situated in District Kachi) was consolidated, but no new military expeditions were undertaken. It was, however, during the reign of Caliph ‘Ali (r. 656-61) that Thaghar ibn Zu‘ar was appointed on the Indian frontier, and a military expedition was sent to Kikan or Qiqan (modern Qalat in Balochistan) under him, who defeated the local ruler of the region.⁵ Owing to internal dissension and political instability, further expansion was halted.

The Muslim state continued to expand further under the Umayyads. During the reign of its founder, Amir Mu‘awiyah (r. 661-80), a number of expeditions to Makran and Sindh were led by various military commanders and/or local governors: ‘Abd Allah ibn Sawar al-‘Abdi was sent to Kikan, and Sinan ibn Salamah al-Hazli was sent to Bodhia (near Lake Manchher, presently situated in District Dadu), while Muhallab ibn Abi Sufrah ‘Addi reached Multan via Khyber Pass in the north. Another expedition was led by Abul Ash‘ath Mundhar ibn Jarud.⁶ Many of these expeditions were meant to re-conquer these areas, or to put down local insurgencies and rebellions. However, as a result, some parts of Makran and Sindh were conquered and annexed to the Umayyad Empire.

Nonetheless, it was during the reign of Umayyad Caliph al-Walid (r. 705-15) that the second wave of conquest began, and the process of territorial expansion gained considerable impetus. His interest lay chiefly in westward and northward expansion, where large territories in Central Asia, North Africa and Spain were conquered and annexed. Expansion in the east could get little attention as compared to the westward and northward

⁴ Conquest and annexation are two different phenomena, and need to be differentiated. An invader who conquers a territory by defeating its ruler may not necessarily annex it to his kingdom/empire. Annexation refers to bringing a conquered territory under effective control by making it a part of the invader’s kingdom/empire.

⁵ Ali ibn Hamid ibn Abi Bakr al-Kufi, *Fathnamah-i Sindh (Chachnamah)*, Persian trans., and ed. with Introduction, Notes and Commentary Nabi Bakhsh Khan Baloch (Islamabad: Institute of Islamic History, Culture and Civilization, 1983), 54-55.

⁶ Saiyyid Abu Zafar Nadvi, *Tarikh-i Sindh* (Azamgarh: Ma‘arif Press, 1947), 33-38.

expansion. Nonetheless, two separate military expeditions under ‘Ubayd Allah ibn Nabhan and Budayl were defeated by the forces of Raja Dahir, the ruler of Sindh.

1.3 Conquest of Sindh, Multan and Gujarat under Muhammad ibn Qasim al-Thaqafi (711-15)

Military expeditions in the north-western peripheral regions of India were a part of the expansionist policies of the Umayyad Empire. The ambitious nature of Hajjaj ibn Yusuf (d. 714), the Governor of Iraq, who was also in-charge of the Eastern Territories including Sistan, also played a crucial role in these expeditions. It was Hajjaj who had selected a young general of his own tribe, Banu Thaqif, named Muhammad ibn Qasim al-Thaqafi, for the purpose of undertaking a military expedition in Sindh in 711. The long-term causes of this military expedition include, *inter alia*, help of the Persians by the rulers of Sindh and Makran against the Muslims, shelter given to rebel groups such as ‘Alafis by Raja Dahir, and growing activities of pirates in Indian Ocean hampering sea trade. However, the immediate cause was the plunder of eight merchant vessels by pirates near Debul (a coastal town in Sindh), which were carrying the families of the Arab settlers who had died in Sarandip (Sri Lanka), and gifts from the King of Sarandip for the reigning Umayyad Caliph. The unwillingness of Raja Dahir, the ruler of Sindh, to punish these pirates prompted the Umayyad Governor to take military action against him.

In 711, Muhammad ibn Qasim entered Sindh via Baluchistan, which was already under the Umayyad rule. He was joined by the forces of the Governor of Markan. First, the cities in Sindh were conquered and annexed to the Umayyad Empire one by one. These included Debul, Nirun (modern Hyderabad), Sisam, Sehwan, Rawar, Brahmanabad, Alor (the capital of Dahir’s kingdom near modern Rohri) and Batia (near modern Bahawalpur). After two years, in 714, the city of Multan and its neighbouring regions were conquered and annexed to the Umayyad Empire. Meanwhile, Muhammad ibn Qasim sent forces to Gujarat and Kathiawar, where important cities like Kiraj and Bhelman were captured, and the whole region was also annexed to the Umayyad Empire. The Arab armies went as far as the neighbouring regions of modern Okara, known as Panj-Mahat in those days.⁷ During his stay in Multan, he received the news of the death of Hajjaj. Muhammad ibn Qasim wanted to proceed to Kashmir, but he was called back by Caliph Sulayman (r. 715-17) in 715.⁸ Ibn Qasim was replaced by Yazid ibn Abi Kabshah to manage the affairs of the conquered regions.

The superb military strategy and the generalship of Muhammad ibn Qasim were largely responsible for the victory of the Arabs against the Sindhis. In the expedition, *manjaniq* (a ballista or catapult-like weapon used in warfare in medieval times in order to throw stones and boiling-hot oil on the enemy) was used by Muhammad ibn Qasim in order to demolish the spire of a temple during the siege of Debul. The *manjaniq* named al-Arus, which was

⁷ Muhammad Aslam, *Muhammad bin Qasim aur uskay Janashin* (Lahore: Riaz Brothers, 1996), 34-48.

⁸ Zakariyau I. Oseni, “A Study of the Relationship between al-Hajjaj Ibn Yusuf al-Thaqafi and the Marwanid Royal Family in the Umayyad Era,” *Hamdard Islamicus*, Karachi, Vol. X, No. 3 (Autumn, 1987), 20-24.

especially built at the order of Caliph al-Walid for this expedition, was so huge that 500 men used to operate it. In order to avoid any attack from the enemy, Muhammad ibn Qasim had ordered to dig trenches around his tent. The Muslim army included both cavalry (6000 Syrian horsemen) and infantry. Moreover, 6000 Iraqi camel-riders were also part of the army. In order to frighten the elephants of the enemy, the horses were made to wear especially stitched lion-faced masks/covers.

In the conquered regions of Sindh, Multan and Gujarat, the Arab administrative system was set up. New departments were established. A conciliatory policy was followed in order to win over the local population. Religious and juridical-legal freedom was granted to the non-Muslim subjects including the Hindus and the Buddhists. The Hindus were included in the category of *ahl al-dhimma* by Muhammad ibn Qasim, who is reported to have declared: "The idol-temple is similar to the churches of the Christians, to (the synagogues) of the Jews and to the fire-temples of the Zoroastrians."⁹ The temples which were destroyed or damaged during warfare were allowed to be re-built. Many officers of the old regime were retained. Dahir's minister named Sayakar continued to serve as an advisor to Muhammad ibn Qasim.

1.4 Impact of the Arab Conquest on Sindh, Multan and Gujarat

It has been suggested by historians like Elphinstone, Wolseley Haig and Stanley Lane-Poole, that the conquest of Sindh by Muhammad ibn Qasim was an isolated event in history having no results. Lane-Poole, for instance, says that it was a triumph without results,¹⁰ whereas majority of Indian historians believe that the conquest had only social and cultural impact on India. These views cannot be accepted. The conquest had not only social, cultural, administrative and religious but political impacts as well.

(i) Political Impact

The conquered regions in Sindh, Multan and Gujarat became a part of Umayyad Empire. After the fall of the Umayyads, these areas came under the Abbasid Empire. After the departure of Muhammad ibn Qasim from Sindh in 715, the Umayyad and later Abbasid Caliphs appointed 46 governors in Sindh successively. The last governor of Sindh was Harun, a contemporary of Abbasid Caliph al-Mutawakkil Bi-Allah (r. 847-61). The successors of Muhammad ibn Qasim successfully ruled these areas, but when disintegration started in the Abbasid Empire, these areas were also affected, and many independent and semi-independent kingdoms sprung up in these areas. Here is a brief description of these kingdoms:¹¹

Mahaniyyah Kingdom: In the beginning of ninth century, Mahaniyyah Kingdom of Gujarat was founded by Fazl ibn Mahan during the reign of Abbasid Caliph al-Mamun al-

⁹ Yohanan Friedmann, "The Temple of Multan: A Note on Early Muslim attitudes to Idolatry", *Israel Oriental Studies*, Vol. 2 (1972), 180-82.

¹⁰ Stanley Lane-Poole, *Mediaeval India under Muhammedan Rule (A.D. 712-1764)* (Lahore: Sang-e-Meel Publications, 1997 rpt., first published 1903), 12.

¹¹ Qazi Athar Mubarakpuri, *Hindustan mein Araboun ki Hukomatein* (Delhi: Nadwat al-Musannifin, 1967), 24-123, 169-238 and 255-70.

Rashid (r. 813-33). Its capital was Sandan (nowadays called Sanjan, a town situated in the north of Bombay). The rulers of this dynasty cherished good relations with the Abbasid Caliph in Baghdad. However, during the reign of next Abbasid Caliph, al-Mu‘tasim Bi-Allah (r. 833-42), the Mahaniyyah Kingdom was annexed by the Hindus, who also killed its ruler.

Habbariyyah Kingdom: In the mid-ninth century during the reign of Abbasid Caliph al-Mutawakkil Bi-Allah, Umar ibn Abd al-Aziz Habbari murdered the governor of Sindh named Harun, and requested the Caliph to accept him as the *Wali* (governor) of Sindh. The Caliph accepted his request, but later Umar ibn Abd al-Aziz Habbari declared himself the independent ruler of Sindh, and thus, laid the foundation of the Habbariyyah Kingdom with its capital at Mansurah (old Brahmanabad). The last ruler of the dynasty named Khafif was defeated and the Kingdom was overthrown by Sultan Mahmud of Ghaznah in 1025.

Banu Samah Kingdom: The Banu Samah Kingdom in Multan and its neighbouring territories was founded by an Arab named Muhammad ibn Qasim Sami in 892. Later owing to internal strife, their kingdom was subdued by the Ismailis in 960. The Ismaili rulers of Multan owed allegiance to the Fatimid Caliph of Egypt. The last Ismaili ruler named Abul Fateh Daud was defeated by Sultan Mahmud of Ghaznah in 1010.

Ma’daniyyah Kingdom: The coastal area of Makran (in present day Balochistan) went under the control of Kharijites, where an Arab named Isa ibn Ma’dan established Ma’daniyyah Kingdom. Their rulers had adopted the Hindu title of ‘Mahraj’. The last ruler of the dynasty was defeated by Muhammad Ghauri in 1178.

(ii) Impact on Society, Culture and Economy

After the conquest of Sindh, Multan and Gujarat during 711-15, nearly 4000 Arabs settled there permanently. These Arab settlements in Sindh and Balochistan created opportunities for cultural and intellectual exchange. The Arab culture began to flourish in that region. Many well-known voyagers used to visit Sindh frequently. The Arabs encouraged intermarriages between the Arabs and Sindhis, and Muhammad ibn Qasim himself married Ladi, the widow of Raja Dahir. The marriages of the Arabs with the Sindhi women were, in fact, intermingling of two different cultures. A new language called *Sindab* was developed, which was a blend of Sindhi and Arabic languages. In addition, Arabic script (written in Kufic script in those days) was adopted for Sindhi language. Arabic language also became popular in Sindh, and it became a medium of instruction in the schools.

After the conquest of Sindh, Muhammad ibn Qasim constructed mosques in all the important towns and cities of that region. Gradually, these mosques became the centres of learning. A number of scholars flourished in Mansurah during the Arab rule and most of them were regarded as authorities on the Quran, *hadith* (statements and actions of Prophet Muhammad PBUH) and *fiqh* (Muslim jurisprudence or law). According to the tenth-century Arab traveller and geographer, Muhammad ibn Ahmad Al-Maqdisi, the scholars of Shiraz and Ahawz used to praise the scholars of Sindh. Debul was the largest centre of

Quranic studies and *hadith* literature in Sindh, and according to historians, twenty-two eminent scholars were engaged in teaching in Debul during the Arab rule.

The Arab rule had considerable impact on the cities of Mansurah and Multan. According to Ibn Hauqal, the local people of Sindh and Multan adopted the dress of the Iraqi traders that included turban, long shirt and trousers. The use of animal skin was forbidden for the Hindus, but those who embraced Islam started wearing leather shoes. The Arabs introduced finest breed of Arabian horses and camels in Sindh and Baluchistan. They also introduced vinegar in Sindh. The illustrious historian Baladhuri informs that the Arab soldiers of Muhammad ibn Qasim's army could not bear the heat and humidity of Sindh and they complained about it. Ibn Qasim wrote to Hajjaj, who immediately sent vinegar dried in cotton for the Arab army in Sindh.

The Arab conquest also had impact on the economy and economic activities in the conquered regions. Trade and commercial activities flourished in these regions. During the Arab rule, Sindh became a centre of shoe industry, and Sindhi shoes were very popular in Iraq and the slaves who knew the art of shoe-making fetched more price in Iraq. The famous ninth-century Arab traveler and scholar, al-Jahiz informs that the Sindhi slaves were very good cooks and they had a great demand in Iraq. The traders of Sindh had commercial relations with Iraq, Oman and Iran. The Arabs introduced their currency in Sindh. The *dirhams* which were struck at Multan resembled the Fatimid coins of Egypt and were called 'Qahiriyat'. The Arabs also introduced finest quality of dates in Sindh. The climate of Sindh was suitable for growing dates and the dates grown in Sindh were more delicious than the Iraqi dates. An illustrious traditionist (expert of *hadith* studies), Ibrahim ibn Malik al-Bazzaz of Baghdad used to import date-palms from Sindh for planting in Iraq and he regarded it as an act of recompense.

The Umayyads ruled Sindh, Gujarat and southern parts of the Punjab till 750, when their government was overthrown by the Abbasids. The Abbasid Caliphs successfully and effectively ruled their Empire with its capital at Baghdad during the first century of their rule, i.e. till 850, after which it the process of political fragmentation began. After 850, the peripheral regions of the Abbasid Empire started asserting independence from the centre, and a number of regional semi-independent states emerged. Sindh, Multan and Gujarat were also affected by this political fragmentation, where small kingdoms emerged. It is interesting to note that these areas formed the peripheries of the Abbasid Empire, where the political control of the centre was not actual but only symbolic. Moreover, these areas became a breeding ground of the adherents of religious sects considered to be heretical by the mainstream Muslim population. The Abbasids were Sunni by sect, and did not tolerate many other sectarian groups. That was why the Ismailis and Kharjis, who were otherwise persecuted in the heartland of the Abbasid Empire, fled to these areas and took refuge. Since the hold of the centre was almost minimal in these regions, the Abbasid government was unable to control them. Later, with popular support the Ismailis and Kharjis succeeded in establishing their states in Multan and Makran respectively.

The ninth and tenth centuries witnessed the gradual rise of the Turks, who replaced the Arabs. The Turks are credited with the expansion of Muslim rule to India in the subsequent centuries, which is the focus of the next unit.