

INDIA AND THE ARABS
PART-2
FOR PG HISTORY SEM-1 PAPER
CC:3 EARLY MEDIEVAL INDIA

BY
DR.MD. NEYAZ HUSSAIN
ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR & HEAD
PG DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY
MAHARAJA COLLEGE, VKSU,
ARA(BIHAR)

Economic changes took place with far-reaching consequences. The Arabs introduced improved techniques of desert-cultivation in the area and promoted date-palm cultivation. They upgraded the breeding of camels, introduced better techniques of leather-tanning and improved the quality and finish of leather products. There was considerable progress in trade. Arab trade on the western coast was strengthened. Arab traders were encouraged to set up new settlements on the eastern coast and even in South East Asia. By the 9th century, Arab traders were taking an active part in the coastal trade of India as well.

In due course, they also overtook the Buddhist traders who conducted trade with the Chinese empire through the land-route. Arab travelers like al-Masudi, al-Idrisi and other refers to the flourishing trade with the Mekan coast. Trade and commerce, besides administrative requirements, led to the rise of new towns in Sindh. The more important among these were Mansura, Mahfuza,

Baiza and Multan. A new currency system was also introduced by the Arabs in which the standard coin was the silver dirham.

MUTUAL CULTURAL CONTACTS

The most important effects can be seen in cultural life. Arab rule contributed to the spread of Islam in the region which soon came to have a Muslim majority population. The Arab settlers married local women. The Sindhi language assimilated Arabic influences. The Arabic script was used for writing the language and its vocabulary came to contain numerous words of Arabic origin. The Quran was translated into Sindhi around 886 A.D. Soon the urban population of Sindh was thoroughly Islamized though in the rural areas the situation remained different. This was so because Arab rule was mainly an urban phenomenon.

There was fruitful interaction in the intellectual sphere. It continued until later times, under Abbaside Caliphs. Sanskrit works on astronomy, medicine, philosophy and literature were translated into Arabic. The more important of these were the Surya-Siddhanta, Panch-Siddhantika and Khandya-khandyika, the samhitas of Charaka and Sushruta and the stories of Panchatantra. Many Indian scholars and physicians were invited to the Abbaside court at Baghdad under Caliphs like al-Mansur(753-774) and Harun al-Rashid(786-809). Caliph al-Mamun set up the Bait-ul-Hikma (House of Learning) where Arabic translations of various works in different languages were prepared. Many Indian scholars were invited for this purpose. The Pratihara and Rashtrakuta kings maintained contacts with the Caliph's court even after Arab rule in Sindh had come to an end.

Several Arab travelers visited India during this period. Two of them, Sulaiman and al-Masudi who travelled in India in the first and second half of the 9th Century, respectively have left detailed accounts of their travels in India. Sindhi muslim scholars also made a significant contribution in the study of Hadis and Fiqh in Islam.

MARITIME ACTIVITIES

The post-Gupta period witnessed notable decline in north India's overseas trade and maritime activities. Following the Arab conquest of Sindh, the situation changed and by the 9th Century a flourishing trade between India and West Asia developed which gave a fillip to maritime activities. Arab traders gained a definite ascendancy over this trade. A new entrant were the Chinese traders who also frequented the Indian coast. To some extent, Indian participation in these activities also continued. The Pratiharas and the Chalukyas of Gujrat encouraged trade and navigation on the western coast while on the eastern coast the Palas played a similar role. In the south, the Pallavas and more importantly, the Cholas, gave significant impetus to maritime activities. Commercial contacts were maintained over an extensive area. Although, the Indian traders

suffered a disadvantage due to the entry of new competitors in the overseas trade, yet on the Bengal and Coromandal Coast, they enjoyed the benefits of a prosperous trade in significant measure. Tamralipti an Saptagram in Bengal and Mahabalipuram, Shaliyur, Korkai and Kaveripattanam in the chola empire remained important centres of trade throughout this period. Establishment of Arab rule in Sindh also brought about important changes in the conditions of overseas trade on the western coast of India, a change which continued to dominate the nature of commercial activities in this area for well over six centuries, that is until the arrival of the Portuguese(1498) and the establishment of their monopoly over this trade(16th century). Indo-Arab trade, from early antiquity, had been conducted through the Red Sea, Persian Gulf and Indian Ocean with the areas of Bahrain, Oman, Hadramawt, Hijaz and Yemen. By the 11th century, under the Fatimides of Egypt, this route recovered the importance which it possessed during Roman times. Cairo and Alexandria emerged

as great entry ports in the distribution of Oriental goods throughout the Islamic and Mediterranean world. The important Arab ports were Siraf and Ubullah on the Persian Gulf followed by Bahrain, Hormuz and Kulhatu. Later Mokha, near Jiddah, also gained importance. Important Indian ports included Debul in Sindh, Khambayat in Gujrat, Thane, Sopara, Chaul, near Bombay, Kolam Mali near Madras, Kollam (Quilon) in Kerala, Qumar (Cape Cameroon), Samandar and Kamrup, in Bengal and Assam, respectively. Arab traders controlled an extensive trade. They brought Indian goods to the Red Sea coast and exported the same to Europe through Syria and Egypt, while they also exported European good to India, South-east Asia, China and Japan. The conquest of some ports of India favorably affected the quantum of Indo-Arab overland trade and maritime commerce even with Europe.

Ibn Khurdabih gives detailed list of the commercial cargo. These included horses, clothes, shoes, aloe wood, "Siyaj"(sagwan wood) and lances. The shoes made in Khambayat/ Kathiawar and clothes from Sindh and Thane were popular commodities among the Arabs. Wassaf gives the details of the horse-trade. He says that over 10,000 horses were exported annually from the ilkhanid kingdom to the ports of Mabar (Coromandel) and Khambayat, at an annual price of 2,20,000 gold dinars which were paid by the Indian rulers out of the revenue obtained from temples and the taxes levied upon the courtesans attached to the temples. For the Mughal period, Moreland estimates the tonnage of ships plying on the western coast around 125 tons. It was probably lesser in this early period. Marco Polo, in the 13th century, describes these ships:"they have one mast, one sail, one helm or rudder and are not decked."The above pattern was significantly changed by the 16th century with the arrival of European nations.

Maritime trade with China and south-east Asia also flourished. The Malabar and Bengal coasts figured prominently in this trade. The Malabar coast, in particular was an important trading junction for traders from China and the Arab world who exchanged goods there. The south-east Asian trade contributed to the spread of Indian cultural influences in that area. The Cholas too maintained commercial contacts with China, south-east Asia and Arab world.

Thus the period of Arab rule in Sindh was marked by significant and far-reaching results in various spheres of life. It has not only impacted political, economic and social life but also led to the development of urban life. Above all, it marked the first direct contact between the two great civilizations set the stage for the evolution of a composite pattern of cultural life in medieval India.