

THE CONUNDRUM OF 711 CE

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The state of Pakistan owing to its relatively young birth in the terribly turbulent breakup of British India has for decades set out to weave for itself an origin story and has, at most if not all occasions, utterly failed in this endeavour. Yet a recurrent theme that continues to appear in such conversations is one that revolves around the figure of the young general Muhammad Bin Qasim and the Umayyad conquest of Sindh which eventually charts Pakistan's origin and history to both arise together in the year 711 CE - the year of the conquest. As much as many would like to place the year as when the birth of Pakistan came about such a notion, though somewhat controversial in itself, often comes off as ahistorical and on some accounts irrational when studied in-depth.

CONTACTS BEFORE BIN QASIM

The concept of taking the year 711 CE as the origins of the foundation of Pakistan mainly revolves around the advent of the regions' first Muslims conqueror in 711 CE. However, this concept is rendered obsolete when one learns that the first contact of the region with Muslims commanders started nearly 80 years prior to this.

The first Muslim commander arrived in the region merely 4 years after the death of the Prophet (SAW) in

the early days of the Caliphate of Umar (RA). This was in the form of a naval expedition against the westernmost coastal regions of South Asia. A commander named Mughirah appeared against the port city of Debal in Sindh. His clashes against local forces is well documented, although differences opinions linger over how he met his end.

Another commander named Abudullah bin Ma'mar Tamimi also appeared in Sindh shortly afterwards in the era of third Caliph Usman (RA). Abdullah is also remembered for having won a victory against the Chach Dynasty however no long term consolidation occurred.

A new name appeared a decade later, that is of one Saghar bin Zuar, who was appointed by Caliph Ali (RA) on the Indian frontier. He too is credited with many victories to his name.

Perhaps the most important character in this regard was the man who directly preceded Muhammad Bin Qasim in an expedition precipitated by the same issue which later brought Bin Qasim to Sindh. Budail al-Bajali was an Arab commander dispatched by the Caliph to punish the rulers of the Chach dynasty of Sindh on account of their inability to control and curb the pirates freely operating from the coastal regions of Sindh.

Budail arrived in Sindh with a large force but during a pitched battle lost his life to Raja Dahir's son. His failure opened the gates for Bin Qasim's famous conquest.

The southern portions of the country weren't the only places which witnessed Muslim activity. In 664 CE the famous Arab general al-Muhallah Ibn Sufra crossed from Kabul into Bannu and possibly penetrated as far east as Swabi in today's Khyber Pukhtunkhwa. His foray did not result in any long term consolidation of power but it is said to have achieved smaller military goals by relieving forces in Kabul from a regrouping of his rivals.

THE QUESTION OF FORCED CONVERSIONS

A part of the rationale behind the usage of the year 711 CE is the mistaken notion that mass conversions of the locals occurred on the mere arrival of the armies of the Umayyad Caliphate and thus the foundation of Pakistan was set. Au contraire, such a notion quickly lends support to those who claim for Islam to have been forcefully spread into the region and for all the Muslims to have been products of forced conversions. This debate arises through the fact that by taking a single solitary year as the start of a Muslim Pakistani nation we make it appear as if the mere presence or advent of Muslim commanders instantaneously changed the religion of the locals which is on all accounts incorrect.

Those who debate for the concept of forced and coerced conversions of the locals through foreign armies and commanders often borrow support from such a line of thought where the possibility of an instantaneous change of religion seems to only be able to occur through the use of strong brutal force. However, the policy adopted by the armies of Bin Qasim in regards to non-Muslims was not outrightly hostile but rather happened to vary on different occasions. The Hindus and Buddhists were equated to the people of the covenant. The Brahmin caste was exempted from the Jizya tax that was imposed on the non-Muslim subjects. Many Brahmins were also encouraged to retain their positions in the governing structure. Many local elements were incorporated in the state structure.

The documented history of the Muslim states that controlled Sindh often yield credible instances of the pluralistic society that existed in Sindh for centuries after Muslim control. Whilst on one hand the ruling class was mainly Muslim and Sindh became a prized destination for Muslim jurists, Huffaz, and traditionalists, much along the same time the greater expanse of the Sindhi countryside was controlled by the Agrarian Hindus and much trade was conducted through the largely mercantile Buddhists of Sindh.

The conversion of the locals to Islam was an extremely gradual process which took quite a few centuries to occur.

Contacts on a theological, intellectual, commercial, and societal level over various centuries in a gradual manner allowed for more and more people to enter the folds of Islam. There is textual and archaeological evidence of Sindh's two largest minorities - the Hindus and Buddhists - persisting as active components of society for centuries after the advent of Muslim Arab caliphates and even in the Turkic empires that followed. Sindhi Hindus were an active component of the urban populations of Sindh right until independence in 1947.

CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE GOLDEN AGE

The third and final issue that arises by adhering to the year 711 CE as the year when Pakistan's foundation was laid is how it serves to dissociate the land and the people from the unparalleled impact that our ancestors had on the Islamic Golden Age.

The Islamic Golden Age was a set of centuries in which the Muslim world's knowledge in the various sciences of the world grew exponentially. The Islamic Golden Age relied on the intelligence and the thirst of knowledge that the Muslims of the time fostered but was also contingent upon the pre-existing scientific discoveries and advances that had been made by the nations which came in contact with the ever expanding world of Muslim hegemony.

The result was an era in which Greek, Persian and South Asian works were amalgamated and then worked upon by the Muslims to create something anew - yielding exceptional intellectual advances that helped usher the world into a new age. A significant portion of the knowledge lent to the Islamic world from South Asia either came directly from the people of the Indus Valley or was transported by them from other parts of South Asia.

Many names in this regard stand out. Baghdad's Bimaristan, that is its grand hospital (one of the first of its kind), was headed by a physician and scholar from Sindh remembered in Arab sources as Ibn Dahan. Ibn Dahan oversaw all activities in the central hospital of the capital of one of the largest empires of its time and in this duration is said to have authored many books.

Another scholar from Sindh named Mankah introduced the Muslims to two of the most significant medicinal treatises of South Asia. The compendium of Sushruta and the compendium of Charaka. Both books were translated and used by Muslims to expand their knowledge of medicine.

Al-Fazari's famous astronomical treatise, the 'Sindhind', reportedly came from Sindh to Baghdad carried by a Sindhi polymath known as Kankah. In its original form it was one of South Asia's most detailed works on astronomy by the Indian Mathematician Brahmagupta. The Sindhind is often credited to have laid the foundation upon which the later tradition of Arabic astronomy was erected.

It is often hypothesised that the Muslims were first introduced to the decimal notion system of numbering from South Asia through the Sindhind. This numbering system was then dubbed as the 'Arqam al-Hindi' that is the Indian numerals. The usage of the Indian numerals spread across the Muslim world and eventually reached Europe as well.

CONCLUSION

Pakistan won independence under severely strenuous political conditions and was thus for the greater part unable to ever define what it was and where it originated.

That, however, doesn't translate to a single year being chosen to be used as when Pakistan's foundation was laid. All countries stand on a specific geographical region and the history of that region is considered the history of the country no matter how young the state is. Pakistan is highly gifted in this regard for it is made of a region which fostered one of the oldest civilisations in human history. It is our duty as a nation to recognize the history of our land and honour the legacy of our ancestors as a whole instead of choosing a single date to chart Pakistan's history from. The history of many millennia cannot be concealed by 3 mere numbers.

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