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Revisiting Bharat-Arab Historical linkages: Cultural, ideological and commercial symbiosis prior to 1258 AD

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Abstract

This article explores the complex and continuing connection between Bharat and the Arab world. It traces its evolution from the pre-Islamic era to the fall of Baghdad in 1258 AD. It contests simplistic interpretations of Bharat-Arab interactions as one-dimensional or sporadic and presents an in-depth analysis of trade, diplomacy, cultural exchange and the flow of ideas. Using primary historical texts, archival sources and contemporary scholarship, this paper argues that Bharat-Arab relations were characterised by reciprocity, mutual respect and common civilisational objectives. Central themes of this study are maritime trade, the translation movement during the Abbasid era, linguistic intermingling and the contributions of prominent scholars such as Al-Biruni. This study not only enhances our comprehension of history but also deepens current discussions regarding inter-civilisational interactions and South-South collaboration.

Keywords: Bharat-Arab relations, Abbasid era, cultural exchange, knowledge transmission, Al-Biruni, maritime trade, civilisational diplomacy

Introduction

There has been a long-standing fascination among historians about the historical exchanges that have taken place between Bharat and the Arab world. However, orthodox historiography often overlooks the depth and complexity of this connection. These tales, which are often framed within the dichotomy of commerce or conquest, cover up the comprehensive and detailed conversation that took place over the course of many centuries. Bharat -Arab links constitute an evolving pattern of cultural symbiosis and intellectual interaction. These ties may be traced back to ancient seaborne trade and the Abbasid translation movement across languages. Through an examination of the intersections of economic, diplomatic, intellectual and linguistic factors, the purpose of this research is to contextualise the links that existed previous to the year 1258 AD, which is considered to be the symbolic end of the classical Arab Golden Age.

Pre-Islamic Foundations: Maritime Commerce and Cultural Interactions

The roots of Bharat-Arab relations extend far beyond the Islamic era. It embedded deeply within the socio-economic and cultural contours of the pre-Islamic world. From as early as 3000 BCE, Bharat and the Arab region were closely connected through maritime and overland trade networks. It had not only shaped economic interdependence but also nurtured civilisational cross-pollination. Ports such as Bharuch and Muziris on the western coast of India were pivotal nodes in this transoceanic commercial lattice. It also promoted the flow of spices, textiles, semi-precious stones, and medicinal products to Arabian ports like Gerrha, Qana and Hadhramaut (Tomber, 2009, p. 102) ^[31].

These exchanges were not isolated to material trade. As early Arab poetry and oral traditions reveal, there was an emergent cultural curiosity toward India's rich aesthetic and intellectual heritage, especially its systems of medicine and perfumery (Hourani, 1995, p. 87) ^[16]. P.N. Chopra (1983) ^[5] traces such connections even further back to the Harappan-Sumerian nexus. His noting of archaeological findings of Indus pottery in Bahrain and Oman, reveals an "Indo-Sumerian" continuity shaped by shared stylistic and technological affinities. The influence of Indian hairstyles and fashion was evident in Sumerian visual culture.

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It highlights subtle yet profound cultural imprints (Chopra, 1983, pp. 423-425)^[5].

In a parallel scholarly account, Ahmad (2021)^[9] underscores the archaeological discoveries at sites like Dahwa (Oman) and Dilmun (Bahrain). He has unearthed Indus Valley ceramics; tangible testimony to the uninterrupted interaction across the Arabian Sea. These findings reinforce the idea that the Indian Ocean was not merely a maritime highway but a medium of intercultural dialogue, where trade catalysed artistic, technological, and ritualistic transmissions between ancient societies (Ahmad, 2021, p. 743)^[9].

Moreover, these interactions bore civilisational implications. Dr. Shakeel Ahmad (2021)^[9] compellingly argues that early commercial ties laid the foundation for sustained cultural fusion between Bharat and the Arab world. He cites the 7th-century settlement of Arab merchants in Malabar and Gujarat. It not only adapted to local languages and customs but also participated in inter-community marriages and religious dialogues. This process of assimilation predates Islamic influence and demonstrates a two-way flow of cultural capital (Ahmad, 2021, p. 744)^[9].

Interestingly, these maritime exchanges had implications for regional diplomacy and soft power. For example, Asoka's dispatch of emissaries to Egypt and Syria during the 3rd century BCE is illustrative of India's early efforts at civilisational outreach. Some of these emissaries undertook philanthropic works and established contact with Hellenistic states. All these promoted mutual admiration and philosophical interchange (Chopra, 1983, p. 426)^[5].

In terms of demographic movements, Ahmad and Khan (2011)^[1] observe that the Indo-Arab nexus also involved early patterns of migration, particularly among traders and craftsmen who relocated to Arabian settlements for commerce and patronage. These intermediary migrant communities played a crucial role in establishing social bridges and contributed to India's early diaspora presence in the Gulf. The notion of migration as a historical continuum is evidenced by Indian mercantile colonies recorded in Alexandria by the 2nd century BCE, replete with Indian temples and deities (Ahmad & Khan, 2011, p. 1143)^[1].

Furthermore, the symbolic and spiritual dimensions of Indo-Arab interactions are illuminated by Islamic references to Indian products and knowledge. Prophet Muhammad himself is said to have acknowledged Indian camphor and medicinal plants like costus, integrating Indian materia medica into Islamic tradition (Ahmad, 2021, p. 743)^[9]. Such recognition exemplifies how India's civilisational output became part of a wider cultural vocabulary in West Asia.

It could be argued that the pre-Islamic Indo-Arab engagement must be understood not merely as a precursor to later political alliances, but as a substantive civilisational relationship underpinned by mutual curiosity, economic interdependence, and cultural respect. These early foundations laid the groundwork for centuries of multifaceted interaction that would continue to evolve under Islam and colonialism, eventually shaping the contours of contemporary India-West Asia relations.

Post-Islamic Contact: Conquest, Continuity, and Diplomacy

The advent of Islam in the early 7th century CE signified a profound alteration in Bharat-Arab relationships. It evolved prior economic and maritime connections into more substantial political and intellectual interactions. The

Arab takeover of Sindh in 712 CE (led by Muhammad bin Qasim) was not a disruption in indigenous cultural developments but their recontextualization within a burgeoning Islamic civilisational framework. This invasion promoted the incorporation of Indian intellectual traditions into the Islamic world rather than causing a complete cultural destruction. Indian astronomers, doctors and scholars received support from the Umayyad and subsequently Abbasid courts. It indicates the esteem held for Indic knowledge systems by the governing elite (Bosworth, 1983, p. 175)^[4].

This time should be understood not via simplistic conquering tales (as propagated by traditional orientalist history) but as a moment of complex civilisational discourse. Works like *Futuh al-Buldan* by Al-Baladhuri provide alternate depictions that emphasise administrative pragmatism and intellectual exchange rather than force. These sources indicate that instead of demolishing current governance frameworks, the new Arab rulers often co-opted local elites and preserved existing tax systems. They also permitted religious diversity in practice (Kennedy, 1986, p. 113)^[18]. These continuities indicate a strategic approach to empire-building, focused more on consolidation than on dominance.

Furthermore, the diplomatic interactions between Bharatiya states and the early Islamic caliphates reflect their mutual acknowledgement of political sovereignty and cultural significance. The sending of envoys to the Umayyad headquarters in Damascus and then to the Abbasid court in Baghdad indicates a wider Bharatiya-Arabian diplomatic network that transcended intermittent conflict. These embassies (often accompanied by gifts and experts) served as channels for bilateral communication and exemplify a mutual admiration of knowledge, diplomacy and multiculturalism.

This sophisticated comprehension challenges dichotomous frameworks of domination and subjugation. It prompts a reevaluation of early Bharatiya-Islamic interactions as historically contextualised processes of negotiation, synthesis and reciprocal change. The Bharat-Arab interaction during this time was marked by a dynamic interplay of conquest, cultural continuity and diplomatic communication. Each aspect influenced the outlines of a shared asymmetrical and historical trajectory.

Abbasid Patronage and the Golden Age of Translation

In the 8th and 9th centuries CE, the Abbasid caliphate represents a pivotal period in the narrative of Bharat-Arab intellectual interactions. During the reign of enlightened caliphs like Al-Ma'mun (r. 813-833 CE), the empire strengthened its political power and also embraced a broad knowledge policy that encouraged contributions from various cultural and intellectual traditions. At the heart of this endeavour was the founding of the Bayt al-Hikma (House of Wisdom) in Baghdad. It was an institution that served as both a translation centre and a hub for scholarly research. In the diverse and rich scholarly environment Bharatiya texts discovered a conducive setting for reinterpretation and dissemination (Gutas, 1988, p. 66)^[13].

It is worth noting that classical Indian texts, including the *Siddhanta* (focused on astronomy and mathematics), *Charaka Samhita* (pertaining to medicine) and *Panchatantra* (exploring political and moral philosophy through fables) were translated into Arabic. These translations were not merely fixed; instead, they sparked new avenues of

exploration within the Islamic scholarly realm. The Siddhanta, for instance, was transformed into the Sindhind. It emerged as a seminal astronomical text within the Arab intellectual tradition. The Panchatantra (known in translation as *Kalila wa Dimna*) has had a significant impact on Arabic literary aesthetics and subsequently infiltrated the storytelling traditions of mediaeval Europe.

The contributions of Indian thinkers in mathematics have undeniably shaped the intellectual landscape. The notion of *shunya* (zero) in conjunction with positional decimal notation transformed Arab mathematical thought and established the foundation for what would evolve into algebra (*al-jabr*). The figure like Al-Khwarizmi (from whom the term 'algorithm' is derived) was profoundly impressed by the numerical systems of India. The translations of his works into Latin subsequently laid the foundational framework for Renaissance mathematics across Europe (Joseph, 2011, p. 139) ^[17].

Significantly, the interaction between the Abbasids and Bharatiya intellectual traditions was characterised by reciprocity rather than extraction. The era was characterised by a principle of modesty in knowledge, where intellectual contributions were frequently recognised and understanding was regarded as a collective heritage rather than the sole possession of a single culture. The reciprocal regard cultivated an environment of academic benevolence. It manifested in the regular references to Indian works by Arab scholars and thinkers, as well as in the synthesis of concepts that arose from these intercultural exchanges.

Such knowledge transfers confront limited historical narratives that confine scientific advancement within strict national or religious confines. The Abbasid period exemplifies a remarkable instance of transcultural synthesis, wherein Bharatiya, Persian, Greek and Arab traditions collaboratively contributed to the formation of a shared global heritage of thought.

Al-Biruni and the Ethos of Civilisational Dialogue

Abu Rayhan Al-Biruni (973-1048 CE) stands as a prominent polymath of the Islamic Golden Age. His research epitomises exemplary international collaboration. His significant work, *Kitab fi Tahqiq ma li'l-Hind* (The Book Confirming What Pertains to India) was written after his time in the Indian subcontinent. It is regarded as one of the oldest and most thorough ethnographic studies by a non-Indian scholar. Rather than presenting a detached or reductionist perspective on Indian civilisation, Al-Biruni's study demonstrates an exceptional combination of philological expertise, epistemological receptivity and cultural empathy (Sachau, 1910, p. 15; Nasr, 2003, p. 49) ^[24, 21].

Proficient in Sanskrit and having sound knowledge about classical Indian literature (including the Vedas, Upanishads and Puranas) Al-Biruni engaged with Indian cosmology, metaphysics, medicine (*Ayurveda*) and mathematics not as an external imposition but as an earnest participant aiming to comprehend indigenous systems on their own terms (Dhanani, 1994, p. 103; Gutas, 2001, p. 136) ^[8, 14]. His comparative technique was based on ideas that may today be regarded as proto-ethnographic: participant observation, contextualisation and respectful depiction.

Al-Biruni's efforts challenged the binary perspective sometimes adopted by contemporary historiographies that see Islamic culture just as a conduit bringing classical

knowledge to Europe. His work illustrates that Muslim academics were engaged as active makers, synthesisers and critics of knowledge systems. In his comparison of Hindu and Greek astrological traditions, Al-Biruni not only delineates their distinctions but also conducts a critical assessment. He proposed enhancements while remaining true to the original sources (Rashed, 1994, p. 222) ^[23]. His incorporation of Indian number systems (especially the notions of decimal and zero) into the wider Islamic mathematical tradition significantly influenced the transformation of world intellectual history (Joseph, 2011, p. 308) ^[17].

Significantly, his intellectual endeavour precedes and starkly contrasts with subsequent colonial epistemologies. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, European Orientalists often depicted Indian civilisation through perspectives of primitivism or mystical irrationality (Said, 1978, p. 122) ^[25], but Al-Biruni demonstrated what may be termed epistemic humility today. He expressly recognised the profundity of Indian philosophical thinking and the logical intricacy of its metaphysical structures. He also raised voice over certain religious practices (Sachau, 1910, pp. 47-48) ^[24]. This equitable position demonstrates both analytical precision and a dedication to dialogical ethics; a readiness to listen, understand and communicate without overshadowing.

Furthermore, Al-Biruni's methodology is significantly pertinent in current academic discussions, especially on issues of decolonisation and epistemic fairness. His work questions dominant paradigms of knowledge creation and supports the diversity of intellectual traditions. Scholars such as Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2014) ^[27] contend that recognising the "ecology of knowledges" is crucial for deconstructing the epistemic inequalities sustained by colonial modernity. In this context, Al-Biruni's legacy provides a historical precedent for pluralistic and dialogical study.

It is argued that Al-Biruni did not only convey Indian knowledge to the Islamic world; he reinterpreted and recontextualised it via a scholarly perspective characterised by honesty, rigour and profound intercultural respect. His work exemplifies the potential and imperative of civilisational conversation based on mutual acknowledgement rather than supremacy.

Linguistic Interplay and the Dynamics of Cultural Translation

Language has historically functioned not just as a means of communication but also as a medium for epistemic exchange, civilisational discourse and cultural amalgamation. The interplay between language systems like Sanskrit and Arabic was fundamental to the exchange of information in fields such as science, medicine, philosophy and literature during Bharat-Arab interactions. Both languages served as intellectual centres of their respective civilizations; organized, formalised and enriched by a longstanding heritage of oral and written transmission. The Arabic assimilation of Indian scientific knowledge (especially in astronomy/*ilmul-hay'a* and medicine/*tibb*) included a vigorous process of translation. Sanskrit technical terms such as *nāḍi* (pulse), *graha* (planet) and *bindu* (point) were integrated into Arabic lexicons by preserving their meaning and phonetic origins (Pingree, 1963) ^[22]. This absorption was not just linguistic but also epistemic. It signifies an important

acknowledgement of the integrity of Indian knowledge systems by Muslim intellectuals like Al-Biruni and subsequent translators at the Abbasid court.

The translation and adaption of Sanskrit literary elements into Persian and Arabic writing was equally noteworthy. The instance of *Kalila wa Dimna*, a Persian version of the Indian *Panchatantra*, exemplifies cultural translation. The text was translated from Sanskrit to Middle Persian by Burzoy and later into Arabic by Ibn al-Muqaffa' in the 8th century. This undergoing transformation in both language and moral-philosophical context aligned with Islamic and courtly values and preserved its Indian narrative structure (De Blois, 1990, pp. 12-13; Gutas, 1998, p. 68) ^[7, 13]. This process illustrates the migration of narratives across regions while integrating into new ethical and political discourses.

The language interaction extended beyond elite literary circles and significantly influenced vernacular cultures, especially along India's western coastal regions. Languages like Malayalam, Tamil and Kannada incorporated Arabic and Persian loanwords. It was done particularly in domains associated with commerce, navigation, religion and legal administration. Terms such as *hawaala* (remittance), *baqiya* (balancing) and *fanaa* (annihilation, particularly in Sufi settings) illustrate the degree to which Arab-Islamic economic and spiritual lexicons were integrated into local dialects (Subrahmanyam, 1997, p. 41; Das, 2003, p. 112) ^[28, 6].

The Arabic-Malayalam script (Arabi-Malayalam) created by Kerala's Mappila Muslims illustrates how linguistic hybridity led to orthographic innovation to address the socio-religious requirements of a trade community.

These language complexities provided evidence of a profound cultural hybridity that challenges binary notions of dominance and subordination. Instead of acting as one-sided transfers of influence, Bharat-Arab language contacts demonstrate a complex interplay of reciprocal accommodation, selective appropriation and innovative synthesis. Homi Bhabha's (1994) ^[3] notion of the "third space" is especially relevant in this regard. It encapsulated the ambiguous realm where new identities, meanings and linguistic forms arised, not merely as amalgamations but as hybrid expressions with their own autonomy as well as epistemic authority.

This interaction has enduring consequences for the development of Indo-Islamic civilisation. It facilitated the dissemination of knowledge across religious and linguistic divides, establishing the foundation for the Persianate and Urdu literary traditions in North India, while also promoting the localisation of Islam via vernacular languages. The language aspect of Indo-Arab connections should be seen as vital, rather than peripheral, to the overarching historical process of civilisational interchange.

Maritime Communities and the Embodied Histories of Exchange

Although much academic focus has been directed towards literary translations and elite intellectual networks. However, the more concrete and lasting impact of Bharat-Arab relations is seen in the social fabric of coastal towns around the Indian Ocean rim. Maritime communities from the Malabar coast of Kerala to the ports of Gujarat served as dynamic centres of Bharat-Arab interaction. Exchange was not only philosophical or economic; it was lived, social and perpetuated by daily acts of cohabitation and reciprocal adaptation.

Arab merchants (mostly originating from the Hadhramawt

region of Yemen or the Hijaz) were establishing themselves in Indian port towns as early as the 8th century CE. In contrast to the exploitative trading practices often linked to subsequent European maritime empires, these early Arab diasporas assimilated naturally into local communities. They established lasting connections that were as much socio-cultural as economic via marriages, religious cohabitation and business collaboration (Wink, 2004, p. 156) ^[32]. The rise of Mappila Muslim communities in Kerala exemplifies this synthesis, whereby Arab lineage, Indian language traditions and Islamic devotion are intricately intertwined into a cohesive communal identity.

Material culture and oral traditions function as valuable archives of these histories. The existence of mosques with Kufic inscriptions, exemplified by the Cheraman Juma Mosque in Kodungallur regarded as the earliest mosque in India, attests to early architectural hybridity and theological foundations (Frenz, 2003, p. 211) ^[11]. Bilingual tombstones written in Arabic and regional languages such as Malayalam and Gujarati indicate a cosmopolitan burial culture that encompasses several realms. The Mappila pattu (songs produced in a fusion of Arabic and Malayalam) include themes of love, devotion, travel and resistance. All these highlighted the emotional aspects of Bharat-Arab interactions that textual records sometimes neglect (Miller, 1976, pp. 13-14) ^[20].

These port communities operated as microcosms of civilisational fusion. It is diversified but unified environments where cultural expressions were negotiated rather than enforced. Culinary traditions, including the prevalent use of dates, saffron and meat dishes like as biryani; architectural elements like horseshoe arches and mihrabs orientated towards Mecca; and sartorial influences seen in regional Islamic attire. All indicate a profound and enduring Arab impact. However, its effect was seldom dominant. Sanjay Subrahmanyam (1997) ^[28] contends that the Indian Ocean constituted a realm of "connected histories," whereby power imbalances were alleviated via reciprocity, accommodation and negotiated trade.

By seeing the ocean as a cultural conduit rather than a divider, we may use the framework of "maritime cosmopolitanism" (Ho, 2006) ^[15]. It regards coastal cultures not as marginal entities but as pivotal centres of hybridity, innovation and intercultural exchange. The commercial cities of Kozhikode, Bharuch and Cambay actively engaged with Arab influence. All these function as co-creators of a collective cultural economy that obscured distinctions among Arab, Indian and subsequently Persian and Southeast Asian realms.

Furthermore, many groups contest reductive interpretations of Islamisation as a hierarchical or militaristic phenomenon. The conversion process it transpired was often incremental and grounded on trust, social mobility and the compelling allure of trade-oriented piety and Sufi principles (Eaton, 1993, p. 53) ^[10]. The function of merchant-saints (*tujjar al-awliya*: individuals who exemplified both commercial and spiritual allure) underscores the notion that business and cosmology were not disparate but rather mutually reinforcing in the formation of Bharat-Arab maritime realms.

It can be said that the experiences of marine communities highlight that the Bharat-Arab interaction included more than commerce or literature. It involved individuals, relationships and the collaborative formation of diverse lifeworlds. Coastal communities (influenced by tides and

time) are essential for understanding civilisational interchange. It transpires via the flow of products, ideas and through everyday living, shared beliefs, as well as collective memory.

Conclusion

Before 1258 CE, the Bharat-Arab relationship is not merely characterised by single incidents, but by a dynamic framework of civilisational synthesis. It was anchored fundamentally in commercial networks, intellectual exchanges, language interactions and cultural experiences. This interaction shows a reciprocal and pluralistic dynamic. It took place by negotiation, accommodation and hybridisation, rather than adhering to hierarchical or unidirectional paradigms of influence. These interactions were spanning the translation of Sanskrit scientific writings into Arabic and the integration of Arab cultural aspects inside Bharatiya coastal communities. It demonstrated a common civilisational sphere influenced by reciprocal curiosity, practical involvement and spiritual connection.

The Bharat-Arab experience before the Mongol invasion of Baghdad in 1258 provides a distinct historiographical perspective on traditional tales of civilisational war or epistemic disparity. It rejects the simplification of cultural interaction to domination or imitation. Instead, it emphasises entanglement, co-creation and exchange (Subrahmanyam, 1997, p. 742) ^[28]. The Indian Ocean under this context, serves as a channel for both trade and cosmopolitanism (a maritime domain where identities were shaped via movement rather than isolation)

This history presents a constructive challenge to modern geopolitical frameworks. In a global context characterised by increasing ethno-nationalism and North-South disparities, the Bharat-Arab paradigm of premodern interaction highlights the potential for South-South collaboration. It was based on historical continuity, cultural respect and strategic interdependence. The legacy of Indo-Arab synthesis provides historical significance and side by side normative direction for rethinking contemporary international interactions. Scholars like Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2014) ^[27] opines that to decolonise knowledge and communication, we need to look at ecologies of knowledges and dialogic practices that are different from the dominant Western ways of thinking.

This shared past could also be used as a soft power tool to improve ties between Bharat and the Arab world in the present day. We can bring new life to educational institutions, cultural diplomacy and religious dialogue by learning from the history of leaders like Al-Biruni and the many sides of the identities of coastal communities in South Asia, such as the Mappilas and the Hadhrami diaspora. This way of thinking might help fix the problems in modern affairs by focussing on various roots and related thought.

Finally, it can be argued that the Bharat-Arab world prior to 1258 presents a compelling historical paradigm of civilisational interaction. It favours synthesis over division, translation over subjugation and lived experience over theoretical abstraction. Its significance persists not just as an academic topic but also as a framework to promote intercultural understanding in a more polarised society.

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