

A Comparative theological Perspective on Ancient Indo-Arab Relations: A Critical Appraisal

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Abstract

Multiculturalism and intercultural dialogue formed the foundation of Ancient Indo-Arab Relations. Cultural origin is a powerful incentive in promoting conflict resolution and peacebuilding in culturally divided environments. Pre-Islamic Arab shared cultural codependence in form of ideological and religious belief systems which incentivized them in having a strong civilizational bond. India's cultural linkages to the Arabs have lost their plausibility after the advent of Islam and the restructuring of power in the Arabian Peninsula. Primary literary sources were destroyed after centuries of attacks by foreign invaders and the destruction of valuable literature of Ancient Indian empires which mentioned varied and detailed aspects of Indo-Arab intra-Civilizational structuring. Post-Islamic Arab literature has dominated ancient Indic literature through the thoughtful assertion of the Political thinkers under Islamic rule in India. This study has been undertaken to investigate the determinants of Indian theological philosophies which influenced the Ancient Arabian Peninsula and the adjoining territorial extents. Contemporary deductive analysis and intensive examination of literature and patterns provide such linkages of cultural uniformity of Indian civilization extending up to Arab. This study aims to interpret the theological and philosophical dimensions of the Arab world through a comparative analysis of the scriptures.

Keywords: Pre-Islamic Arabia, India-Arab relations, Theology, Indian History, Arab History

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INTRODUCTION

Max Weber's sociology of religion, an article on Hinduism and Buddhism published in 1916 asserts the core hypothesis of the "Axial Age theory". This theory is based on a comprehensive hypothesis concerning the nature of "the radical transformations that made possible a momentous breakthrough in the complexification of community life and the differentiation of social fields out of archaic communities regulated by cyclical and mythical views of the cosmological order. The Axial approach facilitates examining on a comparative basis the simultaneous discovery of "transcendence" across various civilizations."¹ Islam is not considered as the axial age period religion but rather an offshoot of the Abrahamic tradition. Culture and civilization are two different terms; though share similar semantic roots. It's often been viewed differently from the idea of religion based on the western connotation. However, in the Indian context, it represents a core mindset of the general population driven by ancient old philosophies passed down generations over centuries. Thus, limiting its geographical extent as per present-day context is not conforming to its core civilizational idea. With time these traditions have diminished, though the ancient Vedic philosophies have a deep-rooted presence in the religious scriptures of Abrahamic religions.

¹ Arnason, Johan P. (2005) "The Axial Age and its Interpreters: Reopening a Debate." In: Johann P. Arnason/Shmuel N. Eisenstadt/Björn Wittrock (eds.) Axial Civilizations and World History, Leiden: Brill, pp. 19-49.

Vedicism or Vedism refers to the ancient ideas, practices, rituals and traditions which shaped the overall distinct identity of modern-day Hinduism. The philosophy of tolerance and the coexistence of all kinds of faith has been one of the central essences of the Indic civilization. The Indian cultural roots in the Arab world were not merely limited to trade and interaction, rather it was an extension of a similar kind of belief system and the same shared knowledge in pre-Islamic Arab. The similar shared knowledge became the foundation for the development of other faiths spread across the world. The cultural presence of Vedic traditions in the Arab world was not merely limited to just interactions through trade; rather it once formed as part of ancient Indian Empires at a certain point in time in history. "As per Arab literature, *Sayar-ul-okul*, King Vikramaditya's inscription was found on a gold dish hung inside the Kaaba shrine in Mecca. The inscription mentions king Vikramaditya's reign(102BC-15AD) and referred to the people residing as their subjects wherein the contemporary struggling societal condition enveloped the whole Arab, often referred to as an era of ignorance"² Historians have argued upon the interpretation of the inscription and biased viewpoints and discourses presented in such pre-Islamic literature. However, there are not enough pieces of evidence that can prove with certainty about the Arabs were under the rule of Indian empires. The possibility of archaeological evidence cannot be traced as most of them were destroyed after the advent of Islam in the Arab.

Historians have often been sceptical in not giving due weight to the evidence provided by the so-called pagan culture in Arabia due to fear of disruption of cultural harmony. Not only in Arabia but also in Persian regions has been the core influence of Indian linguistic traditions. For example- Fire Temple has been still preserved by the Iranian authorities.

Evolution of Pre-Islamic society into a Civilization

Pre-Islamic Ancient Arab society was heavily dependent not only on goods and other resources but also derived their educational and spiritual sustenance from India through trade and people-to-people connections. "As new civilizational patterns crystallized around the imperial power structures built under the banner of a new religion, the radically monotheistic and universalistic worldview became a framework for the fusion of different civilizational legacies. But if the cultural traditions of conquered regions were brought together in a synthesis, there was no uniform pattern of integration. A vigorous but selective appropriation was, as noted above, crucial to the creativity and radiating power of Islam during its classical age. Peter Brown has suggested that Islamic civilization retained closer links to the Greek ideal of *paideia* than did other heirs to the classical legacy of antiquity. The assimilation of Persian traditions was a more long-drawn-out process, and they became a more enduring component of political culture."³ Pre-Islamic Arabs were pagan worshippers wherein the deities worshipped shared a remarkable resemblance with the Indian deities. Many archaeological findings such as idols and scriptures were destroyed after the advent of Islam. However, recently many Arab countries excavated and discovered the lost heritage in the forms of Idols, scrolls and inscriptions. "Recent archaeological excavations in Bahrain, considered being the home of the ancient Dilmun civilization, has brought to light a unique jar with intricate Hindu designs, thought to date back to the third millennium BC."⁴ Sir William Drummond in his book *Origines: Remarks on the Origin of Several Empires, States and Cities; Volume 2 & 3* mentions "the Shaivism culture dedicated sect particular to Indian god Lord shiva prevalent in the Arabian Peninsula"⁵. This represents the uniformity in the Vedic philosophical outreach spread across Arabia. However, various consecrated shrines of Vedic deities were raided and destroyed during the Islamic conquests and all the evidence of the massive traces of Vedic heritage was lost.

A well-known cultural similarity and remnant of the Vedic past is the practice of pilgrimage at Kaaba. *Sayar-ul-Okul*, mentions an annual congregation of learned scholars and individuals from various religious, political, literary and educational domains gathered at Kaaba way before the advent of Islam. This is quite similar to traditions of the holy city of Varanasi in India wherein scholars from various fields contemplation and debate over religious, social and political aspects. Even today, for entry to the masjid-al-haram at Kaaba, a follower has to wear an entire white cloth which is quite similar to the tradition of worship, mostly worn by the priest at the temples in India.

A Comparative study of the Scriptures

² *Sayar-ul-okul*; Page 315, Makhtab-e-Sultania library Istanbul, Turkey

³ Georg Stauth and Armando Salvatore. (2006). *Islam in Process—Historical and Civilizational Perspectives* Yearbook of the Sociology of Islam Volume 7. Majuskel Medienproduktion, Wetzlar

⁴ Report by Aziz Suweileh, Supervisor of Antiquities in Bahrain, in *Indian Express*, 24 January 1987

⁵ *Origines: Remarks on the Origin of Several Empires, States and Cities; Volume 2*

On the religious level, the original Islamic vision did not aim at synthesis, but at the final and unadorned grasp of fundamentals that had previously been obscured by adaptation to specific contexts and perverted through further assimilation. There has been a misunderstanding among various Islamic scholars that Hinduism is polytheistic. "Hinduism is both monotheistic and henotheistic. Hinduism is not polytheistic. Henotheism (literally "one God") better defines the Hindu view. Hindus believe in the one all-pervasive God who energizes the entire universe"⁶. The uniqueness of the concept of God is asserted by the fact from scriptures that God isn't the entity living far beyond in some remote cosmic zone or heaven but rather present in every individual soul and consciousness waiting to be discovered. The goal of Hinduism is to know God's consciousness in an experiential way. Thus, Hinduism gives freedom to approach God in their conceptualization and elevating to ultimate reality omnipotent, omnipresent and omniscient Divinity.

Islamic theologian identifies and recognizes this concept and does not accept it due to their firm rigid belief. However, as far as accepting its roots in India are concerned, it is quite debatable and unacceptable among Islamic scholars. These philosophies travelled through Indian Peninsula to the Arab for centuries. Though some alterations were added that completely disregarded the tradition and Vedic practices like worshipping forms of gods in form of deities through idols. This plucked the very core belief system and disassociated itself from Indian civilization and established it as a new religion for the world.

Historical and cultural developments in Arab with reference to India

Islamic expansionism holds a revolutionary significance in history. A sense of distinct civilizational identity rolled out with the Arabic eruption of religious frenzy resulting in political unity. Like tidal waves, it spilt over to establish cataclysmic greatness, which attributed to far and wide destruction. The severe monotheism by the "army of God" not only destroyed the profane idolatry of Arabian tribes but also almost wiped out Zoroaster from the region. As mentioned in the Quran- "*So shun the abomination of idols, and shun the word that is false.*" [Quran 22: 30]. "The propagation of the stern belief system in the oneness of God prepared the ground for the rise of the military state which unified all the social functions- religious, civil, judicial and administrative".⁷ "The Prophet himself led the destruction of 360 idols around Kaaba. After the idols had been smashed, Prophet Muhammad came to the door of Kaaba and proclaimed the new dispensation, "There is no God but God; there is none with him"."⁸

Once the political control was established by the prophet Muhammad, Islam was accepted and Kaaba became the shrine of Muhammad's God. Efforts were made to abolish all the practices, and rituals and destroy all idols, literature and inscription which connected Arab with Vedic traditions. Etymologically Islam denotes making peace with God by practising homage to his oneness and renouncing the fraudulent divinity of idols. It was only the theological tolerance against idolatry that pushed followers of Islam to commit violent jihad by desecrating the temples and looting their wealth. In 999 CE, Mahmud of Ghazni, an ardent follower of Islam pledged jihad to raid India every year. In this series of raids, the city of Mathura was "ruthlessly sacked, ravaged, desecrated and destroyed"⁹ in 1017 CE. *Al-utbi* in his work *Tarikh-e-Yamini* mentions that Mahmud of Ghazni destroyed a great and magnificent temple in Mathura. "All idols were burnt and destroyed during the period of 20 days, gold and silver were smelted for booty and this city was burnt down."¹⁰ Later in 1025CE, he plundered the Somnath Temple and broke its jyotirlinga. "He took away booty of 2 million dinars. The conquest of Somnath was followed by a punitive invasion of Anhilwara."¹¹ As far as the destruction of temple and idols are concerned, the Arabic invasion holds a rough repute. Al-Beruni Arabic-Iranian traveller who wrote extensively about India saw atrocities inflicted by barbaric Mahmud's behaviour. "The 'slash and burn culture of the Muslim invaders, making bloody excursions

⁶ Chawla A. Franklin Township Interfaith Council(2014), My central jersey

⁷ Roy, M. N. (1938).The historical role of Islam. Bombay: Vora & Co.

⁸Payne 1987: 55-56; Lapidus 1988: 36; Glasse 1989: 179

⁹ Sethi, R.R. Saran, Parmatma; Bhandari, D.R.(1951). The March of Indian history. Ranjeet printers and publisher page. 269

¹⁰ Firishtah, Muhammad Qasim Hindu Shah Astrabadi.(2003) The history of Hindustan. Vol. 1, Motilal Banarsidass publisher page 630

¹¹ Yagnik & Sheth 2005, pp. 39–40.

into India, did, however, gradually give way to immigration into India and to settling in the country, leading to Indianization of Muslim rulers”¹²

Though the Vedic cultural roots were lost in Arabs, their recognition and acknowledgements were done by the Arabic authors in the medieval period. The colonial policy made all the efforts to destroy the preserved centuries of Indian knowledge. James Mill, an influential British colonial historian who wrote *The History of British India*, bluntly fabricated the history of India. Colonial supremacy tarnished the glorious past of India and its contribution made in various fields such as Mathematics, science, astronomy and medicine. The works of Aryabhata, Varahamihira and Brahmagupta already translated into Arabic travelled to Arab and were acknowledged. Al-Biruni in his book *Tarikh Al-Hind* has asserted the contribution made by Aryabhata and the impact of the decimal system. Various Sanskrit literature was also translated into Arabic.

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¹² Sen, A. (2012). *The argumentative Indian: Writings on Indian history, culture and identity*. Penguin Books India. page no. 58