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INDO-ARAB COMMERCIAL AND CULTURAL RELATIONS THROUGHOUT THE AGES

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ABSTRACT
This paper aims to explore the commercial as well as cultural relations between India and the Arab countries. Arabs used to celebrate the excellences of India and its various products. Many poets of Arabia have mentioned Indian flora and fauna, its mountains, rivers, perfumes, ivory, teak-wood, sandal wood, various animals, birds, coconut trees and plants. They also showed a keen interest in Indian weaponry, such as, swords, arrows, and spears. Pre-Islamic as well as Islamic poets frequently mentioned Indian swords in their poetry. Apart from this, various arts and sciences disseminated between the two countries during Abbasid period. In modern time also there is a deep relation exist between India and other Arab countries. Indian products like Engineering Goods, Food Items, Organic Chemicals, Petroleum Products, Electronic Goods and Medicines are the major exporting items to many Arab countries like Saudi Arabia, UAE. Qatar etc. In the same way, Crude Oil, Minerals, Fertilizers, Natural Gas etc. of Saudi Arabia are the commodities imported by India as well.

KEY WORDS: *Indo-Arab literature, Commerce, Cultural Exchange, Abbasid period, Arab scholars.*

INTRODUCTION
The origins of Indo-Arab relations trace back to ancient times, with Arabs establishing deep commercial ties with India well before the advent of Islam. Arab seafarers frequently navigated the southern and western coasts of India, leading to the formation of Arab settlements within the Indian subcontinent. Indian goods were transported to Yemen, then to Syria, and subsequently to markets in Egypt and Europe. Arabs merchants used to bring back to their countries different Indian goods and commodities such as, gold, silver, jewels, incense (frankincense), ivory, monkeys, sandal-woods and peacocks etc. In the same way Indian maritime traders made extensive voyages to the Arab world for the purpose of trade. They also imported many Arab goods to India like, palms, horses, alcohol, diamond and fishes. The regular commercial interactions between Arabs and the Indians throughout this period culminated in influencing each other's language and culture. Several Arab poets had used many Indian words in their poetry even before the advent of Islam. It needs to mention that Indian swords was very familiar in the Arab world in the past and the Arabs called it *Hindi*, *Hindawani* and *Muhannad*. It gained very demand due to its reputation of being very supple and sharp. If we go through the poetry of pre-Islamic and early-Islamic period where we find many words regarding this aspect. Ṭarafah ibn al-ʿAbd (flourished 6th century), one of the celebrated *Muʿallaqa* poets of pre-Islamic Arab age once says about Indian made sword in his verse as follows:

وظُلْمُ ذَوِي القُرْبَى أَشَدُّ مَضَاضَةً عَلَى المَرْءِ مِنْ وَقْعِ الحُسَامِ المُهَنَّدِ[1]

(The injustice of one's relatives is more distressing;
To a person than the infliction of a dispute with Indian made sword.)

In the same way, Ka'b ibn Zuhayr, 7th century Arabian poet and a contemporary of the prophet Muhammad, who gained fame for his *Bānat Suʿād*, a *qasida* in praise of the prophet also mentions about the Indian sword in the following verse:

إِنَّ الرَّسُولَ لَنُورٌ يُسْتَضَاءُ بِهِ مُهَنَّدٌ مِنْ سُيُوفِ اللَّهِ مَسْلُولُ[2]

(The Messenger is a light to be illuminated by,
A drawn Indian Sword from the drawn swords of Allah.)

Imraul Qais (497-545 A.D.) , one of the famous Pre-Islamic Arab poets, also mentions in his ode (qasida) two words like 'musk' (misk) and 'cloves' (qaranful) as follows:

إذا قامتا تضوع المسك منهما نسيم الصبا جاءت بريا القرنفل[3]

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(When they rise, the musk smells from them;
And the breeze of youth brings the wildness of cloves.)

Qazi Athar Mubarakpuri (1916-1996 AD), an esteemed Indian Islamic scholar, author, and historian, referenced several Prophetic Traditions that mention the use of Indian goods among Arabs, including musk, camphor, ginger, carnation, pepper, wood, swords, and clothing. Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) and his companions also appreciated Indian products. Numerous Indian terms, such as 'sandal' (*chandan*), *'tanbul'* (*paan*), *'karanfal'* (clove), and *'narjeel'* (coconut), have been integrated into the Arabic language and literature. While scholars debate the presence of non-Arabic words in the Holy Quran, the prominent Indian Islamic scholar Maulana Syed Sulaiman Nadwi, referencing the works of Hafiz Ibn Hajar and Hafiz Suyuti, stated that "Indian words like *'misk'* (musk), *'zanjabeel'* (ginger), and *'kafur'* (camphor) are indeed present in the holy Quran."

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

- To analyze a discussion on the development of cultural aspects between India and Arab world during the pre-Islamic period.
- Arts and sciences reciprocated from India to Arab culture and vice-versa during the Abbasid period.
- To depict the recent trade cooperation between India and the Arab countries.

METHODOLOGY

This study is based on analytical methods. It's prepared with the help of primary and secondary sources of books, articles, research works and websites for supporting the analysis.

DISCUSSION

The Beginning of Indo-Arab Cultural Relations

Muhammad bin Qasim al-Thaqafi (695–715 A.D) was military commander under Umayyad. He played a significant role in establishing Muslim rule in the Indian subcontinent. He was sent by Al-Hajjaj bin Yusuf under the Umayyad Caliphate (ruled by Al-Walid I). He conquered Sindh (711 A.D).[4] He led an expedition to Sindh to avenge the mistreatment of Muslim traders by the local ruler king Dahir. He arrived with an army of around 6,000 troops, supported by naval forces and defeated king Dahir in the Battle of Aror (Sindh). He captured major cities like Debal, Nerun, Brahmanabad, and Multan and established there a system of governance that allowed religious freedom for non-Muslims (Buddhists and Hindus).

It was the first settlement of Arab Muslim in the sub-continent of India, later on, it became an important Islamic and Arab cultural centers. The Muslim rule in northern India led to far-reaching effects in the field of culture and learning. Some Sindhi Muslim scholars were sent to Mecca in order to learn Islamic theology. In reciprocation, Arab Muslim scholars came to India with the purpose of learning mathematics, science, astronomy and philosophy.

The family of Barmecides under whose auspices the Arabs began to take an active interest in the rich and complex culture of India. For fifty years, from 136 A.H. to 186 A.H., under the Abbasid Caliphs, the members of this family ably served the state as ministers, preserving international peace, ensuring an efficient administration, and patronizing arts and sciences with unparalleled munificence and liberality. It is worth mention that under the auspicious of the Bermecids that the Muslims undertook the serious study of scholastics, philosophy, medicine, logic and other sciences cultivated by foreign nations.

During Abbasid period, when the fame of Caliph Mansur, a patron of learning, spread far and wide, a deputation of scholars from Sind arrived in Baghdad in 154 A.H. (771 A.D.). A learned pundit well versed in mathematics and astronomy was a member of the deputation. He brought with him *Surya Siddhant* ***(*al-Sind Hind*)***, the Indian system of mathematics, under the order of the Caliph Ibrahim al-Fazari, the court mathematician collaborated with the pundit in translating the book into Arabic. On the day, when first translation from Sanskrit became accessible to the Arabs, they gazed with wonder at the subtlety and power of the Indian mind.[5]

Indo-Arab Cultural Relations during Abbasid period

The 'Abbasid dynasty, which reigned the Islamic world from 750 to 1258, is well-known for its significant contributions to arts and literature. The court played a vital role in this cultural thriving, often referred to as the 'Golden Age of Islam'. The caliphs, or rulers, were known for their patronage of the arts, providing financial support to artists, poets, and scholars. This patronage was not limited to Muslims; many Christian, Jewish, and Zoroastrian intellectuals also benefited from the court's munificence. During the Abbasid period Indo-Arab cultural relations witnessed significant developments in various domains. Here are some key aspects of the Indo-Arab cultural exchange during this period:

Trade and Commerce: The Abbasid Caliphate, centered in Baghdad, served as a hub for trade and cultural exchange between the Arab world and the Indian subcontinent. The Indian Ocean trade routes facilitated the flow of goods such as spices, textiles, precious stones, and ivory between the two regions, contributing to economic prosperity and cultural interaction.

Language and Literature: Arabic emerged as a language of administration, scholarship, and culture during the Abbasid period. Persian and Arabic literary traditions flourished, influencing each other and contributing to the development of a rich literary heritage in both regions. Indian literary works, particularly in fields such as mathematics, astronomy, medicine, and philosophy, were translated into Arabic and preserved in the libraries of the Abbasid Caliphate. During the Abbasid period

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prolific Indian books were translated into Arabic by the Arab scholars which are as follows:

- The famous Sanskrit book of fable "***Panchatantra***." has been translated into many languages. This book was also translated into Persian Pahlavi language and then it was translated into Arabic as well by Abdullah bn al-Muqaffa' as ***Kalīla wa Dimna***, who was a renowned Arabic scholar of Persian origin during Abbasid period.
- '**Sindbad'** as mentioned by Al-Masudi, a substitute of Persian book entitled '***Sindbad Namā'.***
- Different volumes of Indian epic like '***Mahabharata***' translated by Abu Swalih Ibn Shuaib, later on, this book again translated by Abul Hasan Ali al-Jabali 1026 A.D.
- Another book written by the well-known traveler Al-Beruni **'*Fi Tahqiq mā li'l-Hind min Maqula Maqbula fi'l-Aqli wa Marjula'*.**

Apart from the abovementioned Sanskrit books, there are other books also translated into Arabic such as: *Samakhya* written by Kibla, *Patanjali, Yulisa Sidhanata, Brahma Sidhanta, Barihatsa Mahatma and Khadya Khadiko al-Arabi.*

In short, Indians thought easily transmitted to Arabic literature with the help of translation of Sanskrit books. We will first quote from Ibn Jahiz, a well-known man of letters, thinker and scholastic philosopher of Basra who was familiar with India. He wrote a pamphlet discussing the question whether the white race is superior to the black colored race. He gives the verdict in favour of the black colored people. In the course of discussion, he writes as follows:

'We find that the inhabitants of India are proficient in astrology and mathematics. They have also developed a special script. In the science of medicine they are far ahead of others. They have made some remarkable discoveries in medicine. They possess specifies for some fatal diseases. They have reached high degree of perfection in sculpture, color painting, and architecture. They invented the game of chess, which demands great intelligence and hard thinking. They manufacture fine sword and are experts in swordsmanship. They use incantations to counteract the effect of poison and to alleviate pain. Their music goes straight to the heart. They are adepts in different kinds of dancing. They have many scripts. They possess a considerable body of poetry. They practice oratory. They cultivate medicine, philosophy, literature and ethics. They have given us the book *Kalila wa Dimna***.** They have courage and good judgment. They possess some good qualities which even the Chinese lack. …'[6]

Dissemination of Indian Medicine

In the field of Ayurvedic Medicine, Indian writers played essential role in Arab world. It needs to indicate here that '***Mankah al-Hindi***' (Mānikya) was a highly skilled Indian physician who treated Caliph Harun al-Rashid and by his treatment caliph got recovered from the serious disease and then caliph rewarded him generously, appointed him to the post of Translation Bureau and commissioned him to translate various medical books from Sanskrit into Arabic. The first prime minister of India Mr. Jawaharlal Nehru says in his book **'Discovery of India':**

> "Mankah, a highly skilled physician, stayed in Baghdad and became the head of one of the biggest hospitals." [7]

When caliph Harun al-Rashid became ill, a group Indian physician was brought to Baghdad for his treated him. Through these physicians, the intellectual acuteness of the Indian mind was brought home to the Arabs. Afterwards, under the auspices of the Bermecides, books on medicine, astrology, astronomy, literature and ethics were translated from Sanskrit into Arabic.

In Baghdad, who lived among the Indian physicians was **Ibn Dahn**, a chief superintendent of the Barmecide hospital, summoned by the Yahya Ibn Khalid to Baghdad and he was entrusted to the chief of the hospital there. Many scholars of Sind gave direction to contribute in the scientific movement in Baghdad by translating their mathematical and natural science and their philosophical views into Arabic. Afterwards the reputation of Indian sciences got spread among the doyen (educated personalities) of Arab. Of those scholars Ibn Dahn, Salih bin Bahla, Mankah, Pajkir, Qalbarkil (Indian Sindbad) etc. was got famous in the history. Moreover, Indian Kanikya or Kaniska , owner of the book "*al-Numudar fi l'-Aamir" , "Kitab Asrār al-Mawālid" , "al-Qaranat al-Kabîr" and "al-Qaranat al-Saghit".*

There are famous medical books in Ayurveda which were translated from Sanskrit language into Arabic are to be mentioned, for example, Sharaka, Sasrud, Istankir, Nidana, Sind Khistan or Sidhya Yoga etc.

Scientific and Technological Advancements

The Abbasid period witnessed remarkable developments in science, mathematics, medicine, astronomy, and technology. Indo-Arab scholars collaborated in fields such as astronomy, where Indian mathematical techniques were integrated into Arabic astronomy, leading to significant discoveries and innovations. The following Indian astronomical books were translated into Arabic:

- **Arya Bhattya (Arjbihad or Arjbihar):** it was written by Arya Bhattya (b.476 A.D) during the Gupta period, which was considered as the golden period of the ancient India. It is worth mentioned that Arya Bhattya was one of the great scholars of India.[8]
- **Khanda Khadyaka (al-Arkand):** This book was originally wrote by Brahma Gupta (b. 598A.D). It needs to mention that Arab scholars have developed this science in a remarkable position. For example, Ibrahim bin Habib al-Fujari wrote "Jeez" (al-Jeez). Muhammad bin Musa al-Khwarjimi (d.847 A.D.) wrote 'al-Sind Hind al-Saghir' and Habsh Bin Abdullah al-Muruzi, one of the prolific scholars of 9th century, wrote "al-Sind Hind" on the basis of 'Sidhanta'.[9]

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In addition to this, Indian mathematicians also contributed a lot **in Mathematics** during 8th century A.D. Arab people became familiar with the Indian numerals (digits) which were called by the European scholars as Arabic numerals. Moreover, the notion of '**Zero**' (*al-Sifr*), was taken by al-Fujari through the translation from the book of Sanskrit.[10] In addition to this other writers who made remarkable contributions in the development of mathematical science in Arab were as follows[11]:

- Muhammad bin Musa Al-Khwarjimi (874 A.D)
- Abu Bakr Muhammad al-Kurzi (1029A.D.) , who wrote all the numerals in his book entitled ***'Al-Kāfi fi-'l-Hisāb'***
- Ahmad al-Niswi (d. around 1040 A.D.), who used Indian numerals in his book '***Al-Muqni fi l'-Hisāb al-Hindi***

Scholarly Exchange

The Abbasid Caliphate was a center of learning and intellectual inquiry, attracting scholars, scientists, and philosophers from diverse cultural backgrounds. Indo-Arab scholars engaged in the translation of scientific, philosophical, and literary works from Sanskrit, Greek, Persian, and other languages into Arabic, facilitating the dissemination of knowledge across borders. The following description of Indo-Arab Cultural Relations is based on classical writings.

1. ***Al-Jāḥiẓ*:** Abu 'Uthman 'Amr ibn Bakr al-Kinani al-Fuqaimi al-Basri was popular with the title al-Jahiz. He was a great man of letters, a thinker and a dialectician during Abbasid Period. He penned down many celebrated books on Indian culture and heritage. Among them the most famous books are as follows:
   - ***Kitāb al-Bayān wa al-Tabyīn*** (the book of description and Elucidation)
   - ***Kitāb al-Ḥayawān*** (the book of the animal)
   - ***Kitab al-Taj*** (book of the crown)

In addition to this, he wrote several pamphlets in the form of dialogues between imaginary persons. The book ***Kitab al-Bayan wa al-Tabyīn*** was written on the art of rhetoric as practiced in India. In one of his pamphlets, he has described the valuable products of India.[12]

2. **Al-Yakubi (897/8):** Ahmad bin Yakub bin Jafar is considered one of the great Arab travelers and geographers during Abbasid period. He held the post of director of the government department for drafting official documents. He had travelled extensively in foreign lands including India. He was the first Muslim historian who wrote a history of the nations of the world. He died in the year 287 A.H. He wrote two outstanding books. Of them one is related to history which contains two volumes and the other on geography. In the first volume of his history book contains an account of the books which were translated into Arabic from the language of India.

   It is worth mentioning that Yakubi, one of the famous traveler, historian and scholar. It is said that he once visited India. The following quotation has been taken from the book 'History of India' which partakes largely of the character of fiction:

   'The people of India are above all others, wise and contemplative. Their astrological predictions often come true. Siddhant is the chief intellectual achievement. Even the Greeks and Persians have learnt a great deal from it. In medicine, they are not challenged by any physician. Their book 'Chark and Nidan' is on the art of medicine. They have many other books on medicine.'[13]

3. **Ibn al-Nadīm (377 A.H**): He was a bibliographer, indexer and researcher from Baghdad in the 4th/10th century. His famous work was *al-Fihrist*. He had a good familiarity with different sciences and was an expert in some fields such as Arabic literature, intellectual sciences, especially philosophy and history of philosophy. His full name was Muhammad bin Ishaq and became popular with the title of Ibn Nadim. He was a citizen of Baghdad who wrote some essential books which were translated from other languages into Arabic. A part of the book deals with the Arabic translations of Indian books.[14]
4. **Al-Bīrūnī (d.440 A.H):** Abū al-Rayḥān Muḥammad ibn Aḥmad al-Bīrūnī was another famous Arab traveler. He was an Indologist whose fame and reputation rests primarily on two texts. One is translated from Sanskrit into Arabic of the Yogasutras of Patanjali, entitled Kitab Batanjal (the book of Patanjali). The other one is magnum opus is *Kitāb Taḥqīq mā le'l-Hind min Maqūla Maqbūla fi'l-ʿAql aw Marḏūla* (The book confirming what pertains to India, whether rational or despicable). This book is popular as ***Kitab al-Hind***, which has devoted the whole of his book to a critical and comprehensive account of all the arts and sciences of India. [15]
5. **Kazi Sayid Undulusi (d.1070):**
   Qazi Sayid, a Spanish Arab was the author of the book, ***Tabaqa al-Umam*** (the history of nations*).* He has written a full and up-to-date account of all the sciences and arts of the civilized nations of the world, so far as these were accessible to him in Arabic translations. A chapter in his book is devoted to India.
6. **Ibn Abi Usaibiah Mufiquddin:**
   Ibn Abi Usaibiah was a famous scholar and physician during Abbasid Period. He was born in 590 A.H. (1194 A.D.) and died in 668 A.H (1270 A.D). In his book "Sources of information about classes of physicians," he has recounted the lives of the famous physicians of all the civilized countries of the world. The second volume has a chapter on India.

Indo-Arab Commercial Relations

India has strong trade and commercial relations with oil producing Arab countries, driven by energy cooperation, investments, and strategic partnerships. These relationships are part of India's broader engagement with the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), which includes Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates (UAE), Qatar, Kuwait, Oman, and Bahrain.

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Trade Relations between India and Saudi Arabia

India and Saudi Arabia share a strategic economic partnership, with Saudi Arabia being one of India's largest trading partners. Energy Trade of Saudi Arabia is India's second-largest supplier of crude oil after Iraq. India imports nearly 18% of its crude oil and 30% of its LPG from Saudi Arabia. Besides crude oil, India imports petrochemicals, fertilizers, plastics, and organic chemicals from Saudi Arabia. On the other hand major exported items from India to Saudi Arabia are refined petroleum products, rice, machinery, iron & steel, chemicals, textiles, and pharmaceuticals objects.

During FY24 (April-March), India's imports from Saudi Arabia were valued at US$ 31.80 billion and exports to Saudi Arabia were worth US$ 11.56 billion. Major export from India to Saudi Arabia includes engineering goods, rice, petroleum products, chemicals, textiles, food products, and ceramic tiles. [16]

In short, India is a key partner in Saudi Arabia's economic diversification plan, with investments in IT, healthcare, and infrastructure.

CONCLUSION

In fine it has been observed that the Arabs have good relations with India since time immemorial. There was a deep commercial relations between the two regions. During the Abbasid rule in Baghdad cultural relations reached to the climax and became deeper. The Abbasid period was a pivotal era in the history of Indo-Arab cultural relations, characterized by vibrant exchange, intellectual ferment, and the synthesis of diverse cultural influences. This period laid the foundation for subsequent interactions and collaborations between the Arab world and the Indian subcontinent, shaping the cultural landscape of both regions. India's trade with Saudi Arabia and other Arab nations is growing fast, particularly in energy, infrastructure, and technology.

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