TWO LETTERS FROM THE MAHĀRĀJĀ TO THE KHALĪFAH

A STUDY IN THE EARLY HISTORY OF ISLAM IN THE EAST

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I

Al-Jāḥīz, ‘Amr b. Bahr (163/783—255/869), has devoted a long and entertaining chapter on elephants in his magnificent work, Kitāb al-Ḥayawān, in which we come across the following quotation:

("Al-Haytham b. ‘Adi has narrated from Abū Ya’qūb al-Thaqafi, he from ‘Abd al-Malik b. ‘Umayr that he (the last-mentioned) saw in the secretariat (diwan) of Mu’āwiyyah (after his death) a letter from the king of al-Šin, (in which it was written: "From the King of al-Šin), in whose stables are a thousand elephants, (and) whose palace is built of bricks of gold and silver, who is served by a thousand daughters of the kings, and who possesses two rivers which irrigate aloes plants, to Mu’āwiyyah ").

Al-Haytham b. ‘Adi (114/732—3—207/822—3), who has been quoted by al-Jāḥīz, was one of the founders of the science of historiography in Islam. He is reported to have written as many as fifty books on the history, genealogies, biographies and folklore of the Arabs, and on the topography of their new settlements. One of the titles: Kitāb al-Ta’rīkh ‘alā al-Šinīn (A Book of History according to Years) seems to suggest that he was the first annalist among the Muslims. Unfortunately none of his works seems to have survived, but some of their extracts have been preserved in the famous histories of al-Baladhuri, al-Ṭabarī and others."

Not much is known about Abū Ya’qūb (Ishaq b. Ibrāhīm) al-Thaqafi (al-Kufi), the second link in the chain of transmission (al-
isnad) of the above story. But he is well-recognised as a reliable 
rawi (transmitter of traditions), whose authority has been accepted 
by Abū Dāwūd, al-Tirmidhī, and al-Nasā’ī, compilers of three out 
of the six Canonical Collections of Traditions. The original 
narrator of this report, ‘Abd al-Malik b. ‘Umayr (33/653-4–136/753-
4), was one of the learned luminaries, an imām, of the Umayyad 
reign and was envied for his prodigious memory.

Thus, there appears to be no reason to doubt the credentials of 
the narrators of this interesting report. What a pity that al-Jāhiz 
has cut his quotation short at the crucial point! Of course, in the 
context of his discussions the only relevant portion of this historic 
letter was the claim of its writer to be the owner of stables of a 
thousand elephants. But how much more important, from the 
historical view-point, was the main body of the epistle that was 
sent by the ruler of al-Ṣīn (al-Hind ?) to the Arab Caliph at such 
an early date in the history of Islam!

II

Before we try to identify this ruler it should be borne in 
mind that the term ‘al-Hind’ as used by the Arab writers of 
the early mediaeval period signified the region known to Western 
writers as the Indian Peninsula and Insular India (Insulinde) 
and not the Indian mainland. Arabs knew their Indian neighbours 
from the earliest times, but only through their maritime trade. 
The busy ports of the fertile, fragrant and rich peninsula 
and the archipelago ascribed to India by ancient and mediaeval 
writers, had in themselves great attraction for the Arab sailors 
and traders, and were at the same time their ports of call on 
the traditional eastern trade route extending from the Mediterra­
ean to the South China Sea. After the advent of Islam and the 
subsequent political expansion of the Arabs the north-western area 
of this sub-continent, which is now West Pakistan, came within the 
Arab vortex, but was distinguished by them from the rest of 
India as ‘al-Sind’. Thus their traditional concept of al-Hind, being 
the Peninsular and Insular India, was retained even after these 
early conquests. The unique first-hand accounts of the strange 
experiences of the early Muslim sailors have been collected by the 
captain-navigator Buzurg b. Shahriyar (fl. 342/953). Sailors’ 
stories of Kawlam (Kollam) on the Malabar coast; Sarandib (Sin­
hāladvipa), i.e. Ceylon; Lanjabalns (Nakkavaram), i.e. Nicobar 
Islands; Lāmurī (Lāmbri), Fansūr, Siribizah (Sri Vijaya), in
Sumatra, Kalah (Kalang) on the western coast of the Malayan Peninsula; and of the legendary Arab El Dorado in the southern seas, i.e. the islands of al-Waqwaq,—are all narrated under the title of 'Ajā'ib al-Hind Barrihi wa Bahrihi wa Jazā'irīhi, 'Marvels of al-Hind: her land, sea, and islands'.

Muṭahhar b. Ṭāhir al-Maqdisi (died after 355/966) in his Kitāb al-Bad' wa l-Ta'rikh gives the farthest limits of al-Hind of the early Arab conception, as

"To the east of al-Hind are al-Šīn (China) and Qāshmir (Chamorris) (i.e. modern Philippines), a to the north is al-Sind, to the south are charred (volcanic ?) and unknown lands and seas, and to the west are al-Zanj (i.e. the Negro-land), al-Rānīj (lit. 'the Coconut Islands') and al-Yāman (Yemen)." He appears to be emphatic on extending the eastern limits of al-Hind right up to the borders of China for, in another place, he writes,

"As for the torrid zone of al-Hind, it consists of islands and coastal lands which meet the territory of al-Šīn"). But all the Arab writers are not agreed on this point. Abū Dulfār Miṣ'ar b. Muḥalhal, who came to the East in 942 A.C. as an emissary of the Sāmanīd ruler Naṣr b. Aḥmād to the court of China and whose memoirs of the voyage have been preserved only in the excerpts quoted by Yaqūt (576/1178—626/1229) and al-Qazwīnī (605/1208—682/1283), would extend the eastern limit of al-Hind only up to the Malayan Peninsula for, according to him Kalah was the first of the cities of al-Hind, on the way from China, while Multan was the last. But most other writers, like Ibn Khurradābīh (d. circa 280/893), Ibn al-Faqīh (fl. 290/903), Ibn Rustah (fl. III/Xth century), Yaqūt and al-Qazwīnī, include Qamār, or Qimār, (Khmer, modern Cambodia) in the region of al-Hind. Reinaud has perhaps best summed up this position when he says, "the Arabs extended India as far as the Java archipelago".

The Gangetic Valley, which was the heart of India and the historic centre of her civilization, was almost a terra incognita for the Arabs of the period under discussion. They seem to have hovered around the periphery of the vast Indian world for cen-
turies without penetrating inland for fear of danger to their lives and wealth. The above-mentioned al-Qazwini, writing at the time when the Muslim arms had started sweeping across the mainland of India, has expressed these fears which appear to have persisted up to his day. Writing about the rich trade of al-Hind he says,

أهل بلادنا لانهم كفّار يستبيعون النفس والمال

("The traders reach only its coasts, or borders (lit. 'the beginnings'). Rarely do the people of our country reach its extremities, because the inhabitants are infidels who kill and plunder.") The very name of the great river Gangā, after which the valley is named, rarely occurs in Arab literature before Maḥmūd Ghaznawi's invasion of India in the eleventh century. Among those few who did not fail to mention it, is al-Mas'ūdī, "a man of the tenth century with a fifteenth-century renaissance mind", who himself had visited al-Hind in 303/915, and stayed there for some months. But it appears quite significant that the name of the river in his writings takes its Greek form جنجرس (Janjis) i.e. Ganges, which fact is an evident pointer to its origin. Even al-Idrīsī, "the most distinguished geographer and cartographer of the Middle Ages", writing a century and a half after Maḥmūd's invasion, appears to be ignorant about this river which he too calls by its Greek name. On his map it flows down southwards and passing through the peninsula (nearer to the western coast) discharges itself into the sea near Jirbāttan, not very far from Cape Comorin.

Of course, after Maḥmūd's invasion and the subsequent establishment of the Muslim Empire on the Indian mainland, the situation radically changed: the Gangetic Valley and its extension, Northern India, monopolised Muslims' attention and the Peninsular and Insular Indias, especially the latter, fell into oblivion. Consequently, the connotation of the term 'al-Hind' changed and became the source of much confused thinking on the subject.

But that is not the only difficulty that we encounter in the course of our enquiries on the subject. It is well known that the Arab historical writers do not take notice of the happenings outside the confines of the Muslim Empire. Even the activities of their own co-religionists and compatriots, which, we know from other sources, were very extensive especially in the field of international
commerce, are totally ignored by them. On the other hand, the Indian, whether he lived in his homeland or colonised in the islands overseas, cared little about recording history, for the world was to him an illusion (māya). But fortunately for these Indian islands, they had the Chinese as their eastern neighbours. The great Chinese dynastic histories and Chinese travel accounts contain valuable bits of information about the history of these islands in spite of the general disdain of the Chinese for the foreign “barbarians”. And in the official history of the T’ang dynasty (618-907 A.C.) we get an important clue.

Hsin T’ang Shu (The New T’ang Annals) records that in the Shang-yūn period, i.e. in 674-5 A.C. Kha-lang which was the leading state of Insular India of those days, elected a lady Si-mo or Sira-maka as its ruler. The country, we are told, was so peaceful and prosperous under her rule that even things dropped on the road were not lifted. The contemporary Arab ruler, who was evidently no other than Mu’āwiyah I (41/661-61/680), the founder of not only the Umayyad dynasty but also of the Muslim navy, heard of this and sent a bag of gold to be laid within her frontiers. It lay there for three years untouched. The passersby avoided it like an evil thing. But one day the young prince, the heir to the throne, accidentally stumbled on it. When this was reported to the queen she was so angry that she wanted to kill the prince. Her ministers interceded and then the queen said, “Your fault lies in your feet, therefore, it will be enough punishment if they are cut off.” The ministers interceded again and she was finally persuaded to have only the toes of the Crown Prince cut off. According to the Chinese chronicler, when the ruler of the Arabs heard this he “became afraid” and dared not attack her country.

The above story, in spite of its anecdotal character, adds a new dimension to our conception of the history of Islam and, for that reason, deserves our keen attention. This writer has discussed it at some length elsewhere. For the purposes of the present investigation the Chinese story raises a number of questions. Was the letter of the ruler, presumably, of al-Hind in any way connected with the event recorded in the Chinese chronicles? Probably yes. But most probably Queen Si-mo or Sira-maka did not write that letter, because it was from a certain king. Was the writer, then, in any way related to her? Was he the poor Crown Prince
who lost his toes, but must have gained his throne after the death of his mother? Or, was he a rival king of one of the neighbouring Malaysian states who incited the ambitious Caliph to invade Kha­lang? Did Mu'awiyah send those gold-bearing emissaries to make preliminary reconnaissance of the country? Did he give up the idea as he was favourably impressed by the justice of the Malaysian Queen? We do not have satisfactory answers to these questions. We are just left guessing on these and similar other points, till the missing portions of the letter are found in some other writings of al-Jāḥiz, only a few of the 128 books from whose facile pen have so far been published. And would that the writings of al-Haytham b. 'Adi himself could be retrieved!

However, the extract from al-Haytham's lost book, notwithstanding its mutilation, and the Chinese story, in spite of its anecdotal style, both fit in the pattern of Muslim navigational activities which even in those early days of Islam extended from the Mediterranean to the South China Sea.

III

At this stage of our enquiry it is worth recalling that a letter with a very similar form of address was written by a malik al-amlāk ('the king of kings'), i.e. the Mahārājā of al-Hind to another Umayyad Caliph, 'Umar b. 'Abd al-'Azīz (99/717—102/720). Fortunately this letter has fared better. Its main body, too, has been preserved by Ibn 'Abd Rabbih (246/860—328/940), the Spanish versatile genius, in his book al-'Id al-Fārid ('The Unique Necklace'), which "contains something on every subject". In the chapter on the Royal Epistles Ibn 'Abd Rabbih quotes an earlier writer, Nu'aym b. Hamrān (d. 288/842—3), as follows:
Nu'aym b. Hammad wrote, 'The King of al-Hind sent a letter to 'Umar b. 'Abd al-'Aziz, which ran as follows: From the King of Kings, who is the descendant of a thousand kings, whose consort, too, is the descendant of a thousand kings, in whose stables are a thousand elephants, and in whose territories are two rivers which irrigate plants of aloes, odoriferous herbs, nutmeg, and camphor, whose fragrance spreads to the distance of twelve miles,—to the King of the Arabs, who does not associate other gods with God. I have sent to you a gift, which is not much of a gift but (just) a greetings and I wish that you may send to me someone who might teach me Islam and instruct me in its Laws [or as in another version: 'might teach me Islam and explain it to me.']. Peace!"

Nu'aym b. Hammad, who is quoted by Ibn 'Abd Rabbih, was one of the founders of the hadith-movement in Islamic literature. He is reputed to be the first scholar who arranged the Traditions according to their rāwīs (transmitters) and, thus, compiled the first al-Musnad. He was one of the champions of orthodoxy and died in prison for refusing to accept the Mu'tazilite (Rationalist) doctrine that the Qur'an was not the Uncreated Word of God but was only His created work. The original writings of Nu'aym b. Hammad, too, have been lost. As far as our present knowledge goes, only one of his numerous works, viz, Kitāb al-Fitan wa 'l-Malā'īm ('On Civil Disorders and Battles'), has been preserved, and that, too, in an abridged form.

The above letter has been quoted also by Ibn Taghri-Berdi (813/1410–874/1470) in his excellent work al-Nujum al-Zāhirah fī Mulūk Miṣr wa'l-Qāhirah, on the authority of a very reliable Traditionalist of comparatively later times, Ibn 'Asakir (499/1105–571/1176). In Ibn Taghri-Berdi’s version there is the interesting addition of one more sentence in the body of the letter, which is as follows:

"I have sent you a present of musk, amber, incense and camphor. Please accept it, for I am your brother in Islam."

This careful historian also helps us in ascertaining the date of this letter. He records it under the events that took place in the year of the Hijrah 99, i.e. 717-8 A.C. Now, 'Umar b. 'Abd al-'Aziz acceded to the Caliphate in Safar (the second month), 99 A.H.
September-October 717, and, though he acted as the one in a hurry and, as we shall see later, met with extraordinary success in a surprisingly short time, yet his missionary activities must have taken at least some time to become mature; we can, therefore, safely assume that the letter was written sometime in the later half of 718 A.C.

IV

The above document throws some new light on the history of the propagation of Islam. To appreciate its significance in this regard we must briefly recapitulate the well-known facts, as well as the widely-circulated fiction, concerning this rather controversial subject.

The phenomenal growth of Muslims' political power in the first century of their era is generally equated with the spread of Islam in those dominions. This fallacious presumption has further led to the myth of Islam being spread by the sword. But the facts of history seem to tell us an altogether different story.

The Umayyads (41/661—133/750) to whom after the great 'Umar (13/634—23/644) goes the distinction of spreading the Muslim empire far and wide, were mainly interested in the Arabianization rather than the Islamization of their conquered peoples. Under their rule acceptance of the faith was not sufficient for a non-Arab to enjoy the privileges of a Muslim citizen. He had to find for himself a place in the Muslim society by becoming affiliated as a client (mawla) to one of the Arab tribes. Under strong viceroys like Hajjaj b. Yusuf the derogatory poll-tax (jizyah) was levied on them, and they were asked to pay heavier land-revenue, kharaj, in place of the specified tithe, 'ushr, that a Muslim had to pay.22 The question of the administrative necessity and the fiscal wisdom, or otherwise, of these measures is not relevant to the subject under discussion. But we must admit that these measures were remarkably efficient in achieving the objectives of the Umayyad Caliphs. The Levant, which was the seat of the Umayyad government and the source of their support and strength, was fully Arabianized very early in their reign, but to this day among its constituent states are Lebanon, with a non-Muslim majority; Syria, Iraq, and Egypt having powerful non-Muslim minorities, and Palestine, which had a strong Jewish nucleus that was turned into the Zionist state of Israel.23
It was only during the short reign of 'Umar b. 'Abd al-'Aziz (September-October 717—February 720) that those impediments to Islamization were removed and the pent-up missionary zeal of the early Muslims was released. The pious Caliph seemed bent upon making amends for the shortcomings of his dynasty in as short a time as possible. The extent and speed of his proselytisation work is amazing. In the Far West, mass conversion to Islam took place in the Maghrib (Morocco, Algeria and Tunis) among the Berbers. In the North-West, attempts were made to convert the Byzantine Emperor Leo III, himself. In the North-East, missions were sent beyond the Oxus which achieved remarkable success among the Turks. Remote and isolated Tibetans themselves sent a deputation asking for Muslim missionaries for their country. South-East could not be neglected. The rulers of al-Sind and al-Hind were invited to accept Islam. The ruler of al-Sind, Jay Siva (or Jay Sinha, according to Chach Nāmah), son of the famous Dāhir, who had valiantly fought Muḥammad b. Qāsim, accepted this invitation and so did some other rulers of the East. Reporting this last incident al-Baladhuri (d. 279/892) writes as follows:

"He ('Umar b. 'Abd al-'Aziz) wrote to the kings inviting them to accept Islam and owe allegiance (to the Muslim state), on the condition that they would retain their kingship (over their respective territories) and would be entitled to all the rights enjoyed by the Muslims and bound by the obligations that are laid on them. These kings had already received reports of Caliph 'Umar's good disposition and of his religion. Jay Siva and other kings, therefore, became Muslims and took Arab names."