

A Critical Appraisal of Al-Masudi's Perception of Northern India: A Special Study on Multan

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Abstract

Arab writers contributed significantly in the development of Indian historiography during the early medieval period. Among these Arab historiographers were historians, travellers, visitors, administrators, businessmen and warriors who came to India between 9th and 12th centuries. These individuals provided important information about the socio-political and religious life of Indians. This record has paramount importance for understanding India, especially from Arab perspectives. Al-Masudi (d. 345/956) is a central Arab historiographer of India who personally visited India. His historiography is based on his personal observation and first-hand reports of his visit to Multan and all that he witnessed. This paper aims to provide a critical appraisal of al-Masudi's perception of Northern India. A careful study of *Muruj al-Dhahab* has been conducted to determine al-Masudi's understanding of Northern India, with particular reference to Multan.

Keywords: Arab historiography, Al-Masudi, Indian history, Multan, Islam in Sindh, *Muruj Al-Dhahab*.

Introduction

Abu al-Hasan Ali b. Husayn al-Masudi was descended from Abd Allah b. Masud – a companion of the Prophet Muhammad. Al-Masudi was born in Baghdad and became one of the most important historiographers to travel to India and China and across the Muslim world and record significant information (cf. Ibn al-Nadim 1398/1978, p. 219; Yaqut al-Hamwi 1922, vol. 13, p. 90; al-Kitbi 1951, vol. 2, p. 94; Ibn Taghribirdi, n.d, vol. 3, p. 315). He was prolific historian and composed a voluminous works in various fields, including history, genealogy, geography, astronomy, mathematics and religion. Among more than thirty-five books written by al-Masudi, only two have survived: *Muruj al-Dhahab* and *Tanbih wa-al-Ishraf*. On the basis of his historiography, Alfred Von Kremer called al-Masudi the Arab Herodotus (al-Zirikli 1980, p. 7/2; Maluf 1978, p. 736).

Al-Masudi's historical writings on India are considered unbiased and objective, even by Indian historians. He evaluated divergent ideas and conflicting reports regarding

important event in Indian history. Al-Masudi visited Multan after 300/912, during the reign of Abu al-Luhab al-Munabih b. Asad al-Qurashi (al-Masudi 1385/1865, 189/1) and recorded that Multan remained under the rule of the Qurayshis who were descendants of Sama b. Lui b. Ghalib during the third century of hijrah. There was also a cantonment for armed forces in Multan – and a great Muslim army resided there equipped with necessary ammunition – because the city was situated at one of the most important frontiers of the Muslim dynasty. Al-Masudi recorded first-hand information based on his personal observations. Srivastav notes that al-Masudi was not simply an enlightened thinker, but was also much ahead by his contemporaries:

He enumerates a series of ancient kings of India starting from Brahma who, according to him, reigned for 366 years. Al-Masudi, personally, visited many places of India and gave clear account of the political and social customs of the Hindus. The main feature of his work is that he also mentions about the tongue and language of the Indian people of the various places. Al-Masudi greatly admires the kings of Balhara for their greater respect for and protection of Islam. (Srivastav 1980, p. 6)

Al-Masudi depended mostly on the Shi'ite reports regarding the Umayyad assessment, while his presentation of Multan is based on his personal observations without evidence from other historical sources. He portrays Multan as the centre of Hindu civilisation and religious activities. In his attempts to depict the social and intellectual conduct of Hindu society, al-Masudi's elaboration of history in *Muruj al-Dhahab* is anecdotal. *Muruj* is also an important source for the study of Hindu culture and civilisation. These accounts are vital for establishing an authentic and reliable understanding of the nature of Hindu-Muslim relationships in the Multan and Sindh regions particularly. According to al-Masudi, Raja Bhuj Rai- king of Qunuj was considered a great danger to Muslim rule in Multan and Sindh, while the relationship between Balhara –a general title of the rulers of Deccan – and Muslims was cordial, as both had to cope with a general common enemy. Such narratives greatly assist our understanding of the nature of internal conflicts among Hindu rulers and the formation of political development during the early medieval period.

The Arab travelers were unanimous in describing the religious importance of Multan. According to these travellers, Multan was one of the most celebrated places of Hindu worship to which people would come on pilgrimages from the great distances. Al-Masudi also records that there was a famous statue of a deity/idol that known as Moltan. Thousands of people from across India and Sindh used to go on pilgrimage to the statue and paid homage to the idol. They also presented precious stones, aloe-wood and all sorts of perfumes to fulfill their vows (Elliot and Downson 1952, p. 23/1). This idol was the main source of income for the people of Multan, as the visitors brought aloe-wood, a kind of costly wood – twenty kilogrammes of aloe-wood cost one hundred *dinar* –that was very soft and easily engraved. According to al-Masudi, presents offered to this idol-temple were the greatest source of income to the local king, so the idol had great significance in the socio-religious and political life of the

area. Whenever Indian rulers attacked Multan, Muslim rulers used to threaten to destroy the idol, so the Indian attackers would retreat without damaging Multan (Muhammad Nasr, 2014, pp. 32, 86, 90, 98, 126).

Other Arab historians such as al-Istakhri (d. 328/957) described in detail the grandeur and religious significance of Multan. Al-Istakhri wrote that the temple of Multan was the most important centre of worship for all who idol-worshippers across Sindh and Hind. Moreover, Ibn Haukal (d. 367/977) visited India in the middle of the 10th century, and he also recorded the significance of Multan and the centrality of the temple for idol-worshippers in the region. Al-Idrisi (d. 559/ 1166) also considered the idol of Multan to be the most venerated idol in India. Visitors came from the most distant regions of India and Sindh, believing that the idol of Multan was superior, so the pilgrims highly respected and obeyed it (Elliot and Downson 1952, pp. 28, 81–82).

The early sources also confirm that the idol temple of Multan was the most celebrated in India at the time the Arab travellers visited India. Al-Baladhuri in *Futuh al-Buldan* and the Indian source Chach-Nama indicate that Multan was the centre of culture and civilisation and the key factor of its centrality was its temple (Al-Baladhuri, vol. 1, 123-205). Muhammad b. Qasim had to face great challenges in the conquest of Multan in 713 C.E. because the Indians fought against Qasim to defend and safeguard the sanctity of the temple. However, he successfully defeated the Indians and obtained great wealth from the temple (Elliot and Downson 1952, pp. 123, 206; Srivastav 1980, p. 61).

Multan's Geography

Al-Masudi describes the geographical location of Multan. He records that the frontier of India was attached to Khurasan and Sindh, and Multan and Mansura are cities of Sindh. Multan is situated on the border of Sindh and there are many towns and villages surrounding Multan (al-Masudi 1385/1865, pp. 178, 190–1). Al-Masudi records that there was a city called Buwara named after the title of the King of the Qunuj, that was then under Muslim rule in the jurisdiction of Multan. From this city a river flows through to connect to another river (the Mehran al-Sind).

The early Arab historians made significant errors in their geographical descriptions of India.¹ For instance, Jahiz (d. 255/868) claimed that Mehran comes out from River Nile of Africa, while other geographers thought that it was a branch of Khurasanian River Jayhun (al-Masudi 1385/1865, p. 186). Perhaps, on the basis of these accounts, Srivastav argues that 'since Arab Geographers did not stay in India for a long period and could not travel the whole of India, they mostly gathered their information from the hearsay narrations of recitals. They also, had no knowledge of the Indian topography, social structure and the religion of the people. Similarly, they were not

¹Elliot refers to these writers as "Early Arab Geographers", who travelled India several times, and left an account of their own. It is also significant to note that a few of them never visited India. But they seem to have derived their information from those who visited India. (Elliot and Dowson 1952, f.n. 1/1.)

aware of the many facts which were quite in vogue at the time they made their visits' (Srivastav 1980, p. 2) However, it has been observed that al-Masudi's understanding was objective, as he had visited India and stayed there. Thus, al-Masudi rectifies the errors of earlier geographers regarding the Sindh River. He writes that the River Sindh comes from the highlands of Sind that are the land of Qannuj of Bawura Kingdom, Kashmir, Qandhar and Tafir. It flows from these highlands to Multan, where its name is Mehran al-Dhahab (House of Gold). The river Sindh goes from Multan to Mansura and then to Daybal, where it ends up in the Indian Ocean. He further writes that the branches of the River Sindh met with each other between Multan and Mansura on the place of Dushaab that was at a distance of three days' journey from Multan. The River Sind then reached the city of Ruz in the west of Dushaab where it was named Mehran. The river thence again flowed in two branches to the city of Sharika, where it reached the Indian Ocean. Sharika was at distance of two days journey from city of Daybal (al-Masudi 1385/1865, p. 114/1). The distance between Multan and Mansura was 75 Sindi Farsakh, where one Farsakh was equal to eight miles (al-Masudi 1385/1865, p. 119/1).

Both Multan and Mansura were under the Qurayshis at that time. Al-Masudi records that Multan was under the rule of a Qurayshi descended from Lui b. Ghalib. All travellers going to Khurasan travelled via Multan. Similarly, the king of Mansura was also a Qurayshi descended from Hubar b. al-Aswad. Multan and Mansura always remained successively under the Qurayshis since early period of Islam (al-Masudi 1385/1865, p. 114/1). Al-Masudi also described the socio-political and geographical conditions of India; according to him, India extended from the mountains to Khurasan and Sindh as far as Tibet. There were a variety of languages and religions in the region. Similarly, there were many kingdoms in India that were often at war with each other (al-Masudi 1385/1865, p. 92/1). This suggests that al-Masudi's descriptions of the geographical conditions of India were comprehensive and objective; indeed, Srivastav conducted a critical study of Arab historiography, comparing them with Hindu sources. He writes: 'for this purpose, the contemporary literary works of the Hindu authors, inscriptions, coins, epigraphic evidences and various other sources, have to be utilized fully and they should be compared with that of the Arab Travelers. This can help us to arrive at a fair conclusion. However, in spite of many accompanying defects and shortcomings, the accounts of these travelers cannot be ignored. Rather they are very valuable informants from the Indian point of view' (1980, p. 3).

House of Gold and Meetings of Philosophers

Describing the historical significance of Multan, al-Masudi records the details regarding the House of Gold in Multan. He noted that Hindu scholars prepared a calendar from the beginning of universe to the present that was placed in the House of Gold. The Indians scheduled their events according to that calendar, but it was not used beyond the boundaries of India (al-Masudi 1385/1865, p. 92/1).

Al-Masudi records that the House of Gold had been a famous centre for dialogue and academic discussions, as well as a meeting point for intellectuals since the rule of Brahmins from antiquity. He also describes the details from such a meeting, where seven intellectuals gathered and discussed the nature of life and universe. They identified the following fundamental questions for their discussion: What is the reality of the world and the secret behind it? Whence did we come and what is our destiny? What is the wisdom behind our existence and how are we brought from nothingness to this physical world? What is the benefit in our creation for our creator? What kind of benefit may God have in our destruction? Does God want to get away from imperfection by our destruction? Does the Creator have desires like we have, and is he afflicted by the loss of his intentions? Or does the creator not care at all about these things? Why does the creator create and destroy us?

All intellectuals responded to these questions according to their own understanding. The first philosopher asserted that no one could understand the reality of all seen and unseen things, and he did not see anyone who succeeded in it. The second replied that if a human being could understand the wisdom behind the acts of the Creator, then there must have been some deficiency in the acts of God. The third philosopher argued that we should understand the reality of our inner self before we explore the reality of other things, because our self and ego is closer than anything else so we ought to explore it first. The fourth stated that it was erroneous that a person could reach the point where he needed to know his own personality. The fifth philosopher asserted that this matter could not be resolved without proper investigation, so consistent philosophical discourse was required to resolve the issue. The sixth philosopher said that the person who wanted his happiness should not be ignorant about his own self, particularly when we know that our life is short and not eternal. The seventh philosopher replied that he did not have any strong argument regarding the topic under discussion, but they were living under a particular pre-determinism; that is, he knew that he came to this world without desire and he was living against his own desires and would have to leave the world that he vehemently liked. Al-Masudi writes that the Indians had a difference of opinion regarding the life and nature of universe but that, by-and-large, they followed the opinions of these thinkers and there were about seventy religious sects among the Hindus (al-Masudi 1385/1865, pp. 93-4/1).

Multan and Bhuj Rai

Al-Masudi visited northern India when Maharaja Bhoja ruled Kannauj during the 9th century C.E. His accounts give significant information about the region during that period. He records that Raja Bhoja Rai was considered a great danger to Multan because he possessed a great army consisting of four wings, with 70,000 or 90,000 soldiers in wing, or perhaps even nine million soldiers in the army as a whole. The northern wing fought against the king of Multan and other Muslim rulers on the frontiers, while the southern wing fought against King Balhara (Walhab Rai) of

Mahangir, and the other two wings fought as needed with the other forces (al-Masudi 1385/1865, p. 188/1).

It seems that Balhara was the general title of the rulers of the Deccan with Malkhed, while their capital was south of Gulbarga. Arab historians praised Balhara and considered him the noblest of all the kings of India because he intensely admired the Arabs (Muslims), as did the inhabitants of his kingdom. His kingdom extended as far as Cambay in the northwest and Konkan to the west. During his visit to Cambay, al-Masudi mentions that the ruler of that region was a local Brahman whose name, according to him, was Baniya (probably Vaniya in Gujrati) who ruled in the name of Balhara. Again, when he visited Chaul in the Kolaba district of Bombay, he said that the region was ruled by a person called Jang (probably the Arabic form of Ganga) (al-Masudi 1385/1865, p. 188/1). Srivastav writes:

The Arab traveler's praise for the state of Balhara seems to be lopsided. As a matter of fact Balhara was always at war with the rulers of Kanauj who were the greatest enemies of the Arabs. Hence, prompted by the desire of gaining the favour of the Arabs, the ruler of Balhara accorded generous treatment towards them in propagating their religion freely. Moreover, when Northern India suffered most inhuman molestations at the hands of the Muslims, the South West India had already come in contact with them through trade and commerce. Hence, it was not unnatural for the Arabs to give lopsided statement in the praise of this state of Balhara. (1980, p. 69).

Besides Balhara, al-Masudi mentioned other kings as well, including Kanauj. Al-Masudi notes that one of the important Indian kings was 'Bauura', who ruled over the city of Kanauj, situated far from the sea. Bauura is the title given to all the sovereigns on the north and on the south, on the east and on the west, for he is surrounded on all sides by warlike kings. He was also an enemy of Balhara (Elliot and Downson 1952, pp. 21-2), with great military strength as mentioned above; al-Masudi's observations are supported by those of Merchant Sulaiman, who notes that 'this king maintains numerous forces, and not other Indian prince has so fine a cavalry' (al-Masudi 1385/1865, p. 187-8/1).

As the ruler of Kanauj did not have good relations with other ruling dynasties of India, the rulers of Kanauj rightly used to post an army in each direction. In the west, the empire was chiefly confronted by the Arabs in Sindh and Multan, which necessitated the posting of a strong army in that direction. The army of the south was posted against Balhara, who was a friend of the Arabs. The Arabs also recorded that the armies in the east and north constantly moved from place to place, probably to protect the frontiers from the enemies (Elliot and Downson 1952, pp. 4, 34). Srivastav (1980, p. 79) has suggested that Arab historians exaggerated the strength of the army and the number of elephants and logistics, but the discrepancy may have been due to the fact that some historians recorded the strength of the Pala Army when it was in its zenith, while others revealed the weakness of the armed forces

during its decadence and decline. In either case, Arab historiography provides vital information regarding the strength of the armed forces of various kings, as well as the state of their relations with each other.

Elephants in Multan

Al-Masudi also recorded interesting information about Arabs in Multan. He noted that that the Indians raised elephants and trained them for the battlefield, just as they also nurtured and trained cows and camels for fighting. It was revealed that Haroon b. Musa – a liberated slave from the Azar Tribe, as well as a poet – lived in a concrete castle in Multan. Once a Hindu King attacked him with a strong army on elephants, and when Haroon b. Musa approached the front of the army, he threw a cat on them and they were frightened into retreat. This led to disorder in the ranks of the Indian army, and the Muslims won the battle without fighting (al-Masudi 1385/1865, p. 427–9/1). This report shows the intelligence of the Arabs living in India, who reacted effectively to the Hindu army despite having comparatively weak armed forces.

Languages

The Arab travellers frequently referred to the language of the Indians. Al-Masudi wrote that the language of Sindh was different from the other languages of northern India. The reason for this difference, according to him, was due to its nearness to the dominions of the Arabs. It is obvious that when al-Masudi visited India, Sindh and Multan formed part of the vast Muslim empire in the east, and due to this political annexation of Sindh and Multan, the Arabs settled there in large numbers, which not only affected the religious, social and political life of the people, but also made a lasting impression upon the language of the people. Arabic became their official language, which naturally differed from the rest of India. Ibn Haukal also confirms this testimony from al-Masudi and clearly states that the language of the people of Mansura, Multan and its environs was both Arabic and Sindhi (Elliot and Dowson 1952, pp. 39).

Food and Drink

Al-Masudi also made observations concerning the eating and drinking habits of the Indians, noting that Hindus abstained from drinking wine because of its dangers. They believed that intoxicating liquors prevented people from rational thinking and a drunken person could not properly perform his duties. It was not, however, prohibited in their religion, although it was prohibited for the king or ruler. If the king was inebriated, he had to forfeit his crown because of his inability to govern the empire (al-Masudi 1385/1865, p. 427–9/1). Similarly, al-Idrisi remarks that the Brahmans never drank wine or fermented liquors, but according to the same traveller, Kshatriyas were allowed to drink as much as three *ratls* (goblets) of wine, but not more, lest they should lose their reason (Al-Idrisi 1960, vol. 1. p.76). However, the Indians sometimes on occasions of joyousness and jubilation made girls drunk so that the beholder would be inspired with joviality by their jollity. On

such occasions, drinks were served to the guests and invitees. Nainar notes that al-Masudi thought that Indian people abstained from liquors not in obedience to religious precepts, but because they did not choose to consume intoxicants and destroy the supremacy that reason should exercise over men (Nainar 2011, pp. 89–90). Contemporary historians such as Srivastav note that, contrary to the observation of Muslim historians who admired the Indian habit of sobriety, the common people of India as well as the aristocracy and royalty used to drink wine on the occasion of jubilation, observing that:

It is quite clear that most of the Muslim travelers record and praise the Indians for not being fond of drinking wine. But it is not always true because our contemporary literary evidences show that drinking was partially used by the Indians—men, women and even by the kings. (Srivastav 1980, p. 26)

Srivastav argues that al-Masudi also confirms that Indians made girls drunk on the occasions of delight, based on events recoded when he personally visited Cambay in 943–955 C.E. This certainly corroborates the fact that, at least on some occasions, Indians made girls drink to excite them to show their joviality to their beholders to inspire them with mirth and fine spirits (Nainar 2011, p. 90). This statement also finds support from Bana, who describes similar escapades at Harsha. Although Bana was not present on the occasion, it must have been a usual feature during his time, and no doubt the same custom prevailed with some modifications until the time of al-Masudi. It is also evident from the statements of the Arab travellers that, though not completely, the Brahmans were generally abstainers from flesh, as Al-Masudi observed. Srivastav thinks that al-Masudi's observations may be treated as correct, in that the eating of flesh by Brahmans was not common (Srivastav 1980, p. 27), thus suggesting the general accuracy of al-Masudi's reports regarding the eating habits of people of northern India.

Conclusion

The present research confirms that al-Masudi's perceptions of northern India were accurate, as has been acknowledged by the medieval and even modern Hindu authors. Al-Masudi visited Multan and stayed there for about four years, so his understanding of Multan and its socio-cultural life was not superficial, but rather based on his realistic assessment of the region, without exaggeration. The Indian sources also confirm most of the events recorded by al-Masudi, so it appears that al-Masudi's knowledge of northern India is extensive, and he presented socio-political, religious and geographical information concerning Multan and its environs in an authentic and comprehensive way. His historiography provides significant information that allows our better understanding of and construction of a history about northern India and Multan.

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