



Battle of Miani, oil on wood | DRY LEAVES FROM YOUNG EGYPT, VOLUME I

FREEING HISTORY

How to counter colonial myths about Muslim arrival in Sindh

BY MANAN AHMED ASIF

It is a fact not so easily known, thus rarely acknowledged, that the British colonial project in India at one moment turned into an excavation of India's pasts. This excavation was aimed at exploring the arrival of various 'foreign' people, cultures, religions and politics into the Subcontinent. After all, the Indian peninsula had been the site of commercial, political and military incursions by the Portuguese, the Dutch and the Timurids since 1498. Surely, one reason for the excavation was that, as the latest foreigners to arrive in India, the British wanted a justification for their own arrival. The other reason is tied to the way in which the British saw themselves as heirs to the Romans.

Edward Gibbon published the first volume of his book *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* in 1776,

the year Great Britain lost 13 of its colonies in America. All six volumes of the book came out by 1788 to tremendous acclaim and sales. A central theme in Gibbon's work was his quest for historical linkages between Pax Britannica – the period of British-dominated world order – and Pax Romana. He provided the foundational stone for a theory that sought to legitimise British colonial enterprise as a successor to a great empire of the past that brought a long era of peace and prosperity for Europe in its wake. Even more influential, I would argue, is his exploration of the relationship between race and politics within the context of the Roman experience. This relationship was immediately employed in legitimising the British conquest of India.

The British formally began their imperial project in India

in 1757 after the Battle of Plassey. In 1783, William Jones arrived as a sessions judge at Fort William in Calcutta. Over the next decade, he founded the new science of philology that combined linguistics with human migration patterns and mingling of races across the Indo-European region. He linked ancient languages and prehistoric migrations to the long history of foreign arrivals into India, a process that would culminate in the advent of the British presence in the Subcontinent. He came up with a story that linked Greek, Latin and Sanskrit languages via a "common source" that "no longer existed". This "common source" was "conquerors from other kingdoms in some very remote age".

By the early 19th century, a new generation of British officers became scholars of India's pasts. They imagined themselves as latter-day Alexander the Greats, amassing accounts of geographies, peoples and objects that connected India to the Greeks, and by extension to the Romans, of the past. Alexander Burnes, James Tod, Richard F Burton and Edward B Eastwick were most prominent among them. They travelled between Kabul and Bombay and collected manuscripts, coins and copper utensils in order to establish how India came under Greek influence through Alexander the Great's conquest of the northwestern parts

of the Subcontinent. Their research focused on Greek and Roman trade with India, Alexander's conquest and the remnants of his armies that stayed back in the areas he had passed through. They also looked into migrations from the Central Asian Steppe into the Subcontinent and the relationship of all these developments to the evolution of languages, cities, religions and politics. The journals of the royal Asiatic societies of Bengal and Bombay published their findings on the presence of the Arya, the Indo-Parthians, the Indo-Bactrians and the "White Huns" in the Indian subcontinent — communities that had hints of a common Eurasian ancestry.

By the middle of the 19th century, a new generation of British historians took up the project of collating this 'raw' data into historical treatises. H M Elliot and M Elphinstone were the forerunners in this generation. They were followed by Vincent Smith, Stanley Lane-Poole, Alexander Cunningham and R B Whitehead, among others. As the British colonial project expanded geographically – from Calcutta to Delhi, from Madras to Bombay and from Lahore to Peshawar – it delved deeper and deeper in time as far as excavation of India's pasts was concerned. The roots of the Sanskrit language, the genealogy of the Aryan race, the

origins of the Subcontinent's indigenous "tribes" and the etymology of names of places show up regularly in the huge reams of colonial speeches, journal articles, travelogues, district reports, histories and commentaries of that era. Nestled in the middle of this project – and first highlighted in the middle of the 19th century – is the question of Muslim arrival in India.

The East India Company defeated the Talpur Mirs in 1843 at Miani and conquered the princely state of Sindh. The conquest was cast as a corrective to the Muslim conquest of India — a move to emancipate the Hindus from the clutches of foreign Muslim rule going as far back as the early eighth century. Centred on the delta of the Indus river opening into the Arabian Sea, Sindh comprised a series of ports and large tracts of dry, desert-like terrain.

The state was a borderland for the East India Company at the beginning of the 19th century, though in contemporary maps it is surrounded by other parts of the Subcontinent such as Gujarat, Rajasthan, Punjab and Balochistan. Indus, uncharted by the company till then, offered an upstream link from Bombay to Lahore, the capital of Ranjit Singh's Sikh kingdom. Through the deserts of Thar and Balochistan, Sindh linked India to the Durrani court in Kabul. The company envisioned it as a necessary buffer between its long-established Bombay Presidency and Afghanistan (as well as French and Russian interests in Central Asia and Iran). More importantly, its scholar-warriors had already discovered that it was in Sindh that Muhammad bin Qasim had defeated the polity founded by the "White Huns" – remnants of the Indo-Bactrians – in 712 and pushed the Hindus of India into a millennium of domination by the Muslims. This discovery was immediately put to political use.

Edward Law Ellenborough, governor-general of the East India Company at the time, dramatically brought back the "gates of Somnath" temple from Kabul to show to the Hindus that his company was there to counter Muslim tyranny. In his declaration of 1842 to "all Princes and Chiefs and People of India", he announced that the return of the spoiled remains of the temple to India avenged "the insult of 800 years ... the gates of the temple of Somnath, so long the memorial of your humiliation, are become the proudest record of your national glory". Ellenborough's political strategy was to cast the company as a rectifier of the historical harm the Muslims had inflicted on Hindus. It mattered little that the "gates" had little to do with Somnath.

Charles Napier, a veteran military commander of imperial wars in Europe who was chosen by Ellenborough to conquer Sindh, was a deeply religious man. He had just arrived in India when he launched his campaign in Sindh. He was convinced that the company had become beholden to commerce and had shied away from its divine mission. He saw the 'liberation' of Sindh from its despotic Muslim rulers as his Christian duty. He called the Talpurs the "greatest ruffians" and "imbeciles" who possessed "zenanas filled with young girls torn from their friends" and treated the women in the harem "with revolting barbarity". The Talpurs, he said, were even prone to enjoying occasional "human sacrifice".



A lithograph of a Sindhi man and his attendants by James Atkinson
| KARACHI UNDER THE RAJ 1843-1947

Napier's annexation of Sindh on February 17, 1843 was hailed by the British as a heroic event. Some of them likened it to the Battle of Plassey, the founding moment of British rule in India: "Since Clive's glorious victory at Plassey there has been nothing achieved by native or European troops in India at all to compare to it," wrote one. It was in his victory that stories about the advent of British rule in India – portrayed as the return of the long displaced and dominated Indo-European races – and those about the origins of Muslim rule in the Subcontinent, presented as domination by a foreign religious power, converged.

British quest for Muslim 'origins' in India subsequently shaped the historical consciousness of native historians trained at University of Calcutta, Aligarh Muslim University, Maharaja Sayajirao University of Baroda and Osmania University. Shibli Nomani (1857-1914), Jadunath Sarkar (1870-1958), Syed Sulaiman Nadvi (1884-1953), R C Majumdar (1888-1980), Mohammad Habib (1895-1971) and B D Mirchandani (1906-1980) are some of the key historians who grappled with the question of Muslim arrival in the Subcontinent as they endeavoured to find a nationalist response to colonial historiography. Writing in journals such as *Calcutta Review*, *Muslim Review*, *Islamic Culture* and *Indian Historical Review*, many of them found their efforts to come up with an anti-colonial history clashing with colonial narratives about Muslim rule in India. They struggled to weave Muslim history into a nationalist narrative, given that Muslim rulers in the Subcontinent had been shown by

colonial historians to be despots of foreign origin who had demolished countless Hindu temples during their conquests and reigns.

Central to the argument about Muslims in India being religious invaders from outside was a particular text — *Chachnama*. It entered, in bits and pieces, into colonial historiography in the early 19th century. From Elliot to Elphinstone and Smith, the British historians writing on the history of Islam in India treated *Chachnama* as a book of conquest. Originally written in Farsi around 1220, it was a self-proclaimed translation of an eighth century Arabic history of Muhammad bin Qasim's campaign in Sindh. It describes events that preceded his conquest as well those that happened during his stay in this part of the world — a period stretching roughly over 60 years.

In the writings of Indian nationalist historians such as Sarkar and Majumdar, *Chachnama* and the figure of the outsider Muslim loomed large. Sarkar's lectures on Indian pasts – as well as his histories of Mughal India – took their cue from British historians and argued that India's conquest by "foreign immigrant" Muslims differed fundamentally from all preceding invasions because of Islam's "fiercely monotheistic nature" — something that contrasted with polytheistic religious practices of pre-Islam India. Majumdar's treatment of the "Arab Conquest of Sind" presented the Muslims as conquerors by disposition who inevitably cast their covetous eyes on India after conquering Spain.

There is neither any attempt to decolonise our history nor is there any awareness of what violence colonial knowledge practices have wreaked on writings about our pasts.

In contrast, a generation of Muslim scholars emphasised historical connections between Arabia and India that predate Muhammad bin Qasim's arrival. Nomani highlighted those connections in his biographies of the Prophet of Islam and other key figures of early Islam. Between 1882 and 1898, he produced a wide variety of historical essays on the early Muslim state in India, highlighting the earliest links between the two regions. Nadvi and Abdul Halim Sharrar wrote histories of Sindh in the early decades of the 20th century in the same vein. Habib, a Marxist historian, forcefully argued in his 1929 essay *Arab Conquest of Sind* that Muslims arrived in India not as conquerors but as settlers.

These Muslim historians, however, could not get past *Chachnama*'s categorisation as a book of conquest. Even after 1947, historians working across South Asia and the United Kingdom have produced further investigations into the history of Muslim pasts in Sindh, treating this ancient text the way the colonial historians did. U M Daudpota, Nabi Bukhsh Khan Baloch, Mubarak Ali, H T Lambrick and Peter Hardy have all written numerous articles and books on *Chachnama*. They all agree that Sindh's military conquest by Muhammad bin Qasim heralded Muslim arrival in India.

Yet this 'origins' narrative was based on the false categorisation of *Chachnama*. It reads unlike any other history of conquest written in Arabic or Farsi at the time. It incorporates much that is of little relevance to Muhammad bin Qasim's invasion and occupation of Sindh. It is less a history of the eighth century and more a political theory for the 13th century. Its claim to be a translation of an earlier Arabic text is, in fact, meant to evoke the memory of nearly 500 years of Muslim presence in Sindh as an era of cohabitation and accommodation. It offers a history of both land and sea links between ports in Sindh and Gujarat – such as Daybul, Diu and Thane – and the Arabian ports of Aden, Muscat, Bahrain, Dammam and Siraf. It draws upon texts in Farsi, Pahlavi and Prakrit that explore thousands of years of connections between Oman and Yemen on the one hand and Sri Lanka and Zanzibar on the other. In *Chachnama*, these relationships span trade, marriages, settlement, languages and customs and they render it impossible to create and maintain a dichotomy between the Muslims and the Hindus as being merely rivals.

The book has been deliberately misappropriated and misread by British colonial historians since the early 1820s. They changed the "other" with the "outsider" in their work and a history of belonging became a history of exclusion.



Faiz Mahal, built by the Talpur rulers of Khairpur in Sindh | WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

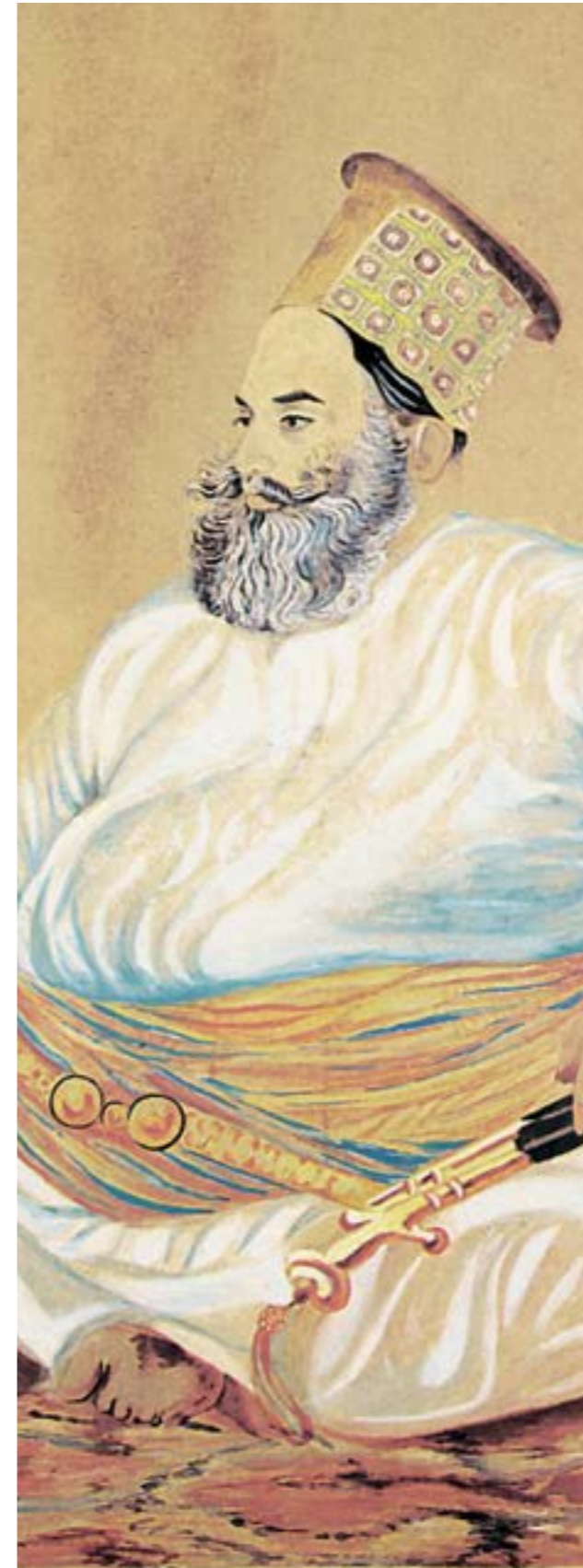
John Jehangir Bede's doctoral dissertation, *The Arabs in Sind: 712-1026 AD*, was written within this academic context. Submitted to the University of Utah in 1973, the thesis remained unpublished until Karachi's Endowment Fund Trust for Preservation of the Heritage of Sindh (EFT) printed it earlier this year. We do not know why Bede never published his work. Notes on the dust jacket of the book state that all attempts to trace his family or career were largely unsuccessful. The only thing we know is that he worked with Dr Aziz S Atiya, an influential historian of the Crusades, and that his work has been cited and expanded upon by historians such as Derryl MacLean, Mubarak Ali, Muhammad Yar Khan and Yohannan Friedman in the 1980s and 1990s. How are we to read this dissertation in 2017? One possible way is to see what the history of Muslim origins in India, as well as the historiography detailed above, looked like in 1973.

Bede starts his dissertation by reflecting on the fact that the history of Sindh has received little contemporary attention. He observes that this is because there have been relatively few textual sources for this history and that historians have been "generally subject to preconceived prejudices mainly colored by the religious outlook of particular authors". Instead of treating the Muslims as religious invaders, he explores an economic basis for their conquest of Sindh by examining a variety of sources,

earliest of which date to the middle of the ninth century. In his last chapter, *Commerce and Culture in Sind*, he draws upon travelogues, merchant accounts and poetry from the ninth and 10th centuries to argue that there once existed an interconnected Indian Ocean world in which Sindh was a pivot.

Bede also subverts the colonial historical narrative that projected British arrival in India as being diametrically different from Muslim arrival in the Subcontinent. He instead states that the history of the Arab conquest of Sindh is quite similar to the history of its British conquest in 1843. "... there is a striking similarity between the Arab administration of Sind and the British administration in India a thousand years later," he comments.

Bede's work enters our world as an artefact or an object. It is inert — a frozen specimen from an earlier era of history writing. Its inertness prompts us to look at EFT which has brought this object into the world. EFT is a non-profit, non-governmental organisation dedicated to preserving the "artistic, tangible and intangible heritage" of Sindh. It seems to be doing salutary work in conserving, maintaining and preserving various archaeological sites in Sindh. The book is part of its publications programme that publishes older, unavailable scholarly writings besides commissioning new works. I, however, see the re-publishing of older scholarship without new, updated,



Mir Muhammad Nasir Khan, the Talpur ruler who fought the Battle of Miani | DRY LEAVES FROM YOUNG EGYPT, VOLUME II

critical introductions as an ill-advised move. This is particularly so for Bede's work because, being previously unpublished, it has not gone through necessary scholarly review and debate. *The Arabs in Sind*, thus, appears as a new text to an ordinary reader who has no idea where to place it in scholarship on Sindh or how to understand its contents.

The practice of publishing old texts is common in Pakistan; British-era district gazetteers and other colonial texts are routinely reprinted as de facto introductions to the history of the Subcontinent. The unwholesome after-effect of this is that colonial biases and frameworks remain uncontested and widely popular. There is neither any attempt to decolonise our history nor is there any awareness of what violence colonial knowledge practices have wreaked on writings about our pasts.

Seventy years after Partition, it is about time that readers and writers in Pakistan rethink and reimagine their histories. The past requires analysis in the light of new questions and new critical frameworks. We cannot be held hostage to British narratives about Muslim arrival in India as religion-inspired invaders from Arabia. Rethinking and reimagining Sindh's past — especially concerning the era starting from Mohenjodaro and ending in Muhammad bin Qasim's arrival — is crucially relevant to Pakistan's history precisely because it will help us determine whether we came here from outside on a divine mission or whether our story is more complex than British colonial historians, as well as our own state-sponsored histories, have us believe.

We need to expand the primary sources of our history and Bede's treatise offers helpful information on this count. We need to encourage the study of languages such as Sanskrit, Pahlavi, Farsi, Arabic, Sindhi and Gujarati in which these sources were written so that we do not end up misreading and misinterpreting them as we did in the case of *Chachnama*. These studies can enable our students to look at medieval pasts in all their complexity. We also need to equip our institutions to promote new methods of researching and writing history.

We need all this to stem the erasure of nuance and diversity in historical accounts, a practice that started with colonial historiography and continues in our postcolonial present. The last footnote in Bede's dissertation offers a strong rationale for working against this erasure. The note pertains to a paragraph that praises "the successors of the Arabs" who "though Muslims themselves, wisely maintained a tolerant attitude toward their non-Muslim subjects". What subsequently changed, Bede argues, was the attitude of the later Turkic rulers. The note itself reminds us that "roughly one-fourth of the entire population of Sind was non-Muslim" in 1947. This proportion has continued to decrease since then. The population of Hindus in Sindh was roughly six per cent as per the 1998 census. This should trouble all of us who care for a diverse Pakistan.

Just as Sindh's past cannot be reduced to the history of one community, one sect or one faith, so should we aim for an inclusive present for the province — as well as for the country. □