



INDIA AND THE ARAB WORLD: FUSION OF ART, CULTURE AND TRADITIONS

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Abstract

The historical records reveal that the trade linkages were primarily responsible for cultural and artistic transmissions blending the two India and Arab World into an everlasting relationship. It is sometimes maintained that the study of Indian Art and Culture is incomplete without studying the Arab aspect. Arab World injected numerous of its cultural traits, foods and traditions in the Indian subcontinent. This paper brings forth the fusion of art, culture and tradition between the two entities from their civilisational past to the present. It is not that only Indian culture and art has received Arab features; instead, Arab culture has been equally impacted by the Indian culture.

Keywords: India, arab world, Artistic fusion, Cultural transmission, Civilizational past

Introduction

The day was 20th April in the year 2019 when a large number of devotees from around the World gathered at Abu Dhabi to celebrate the foundation laying ceremony for the BAPS (Bochasanwasi Akshar Purushottam Swaminarayan Sanstha) Shri Swaminarayan Mandir of Abu Dhabi in UAE.ⁱ The ceremony was held in the presence of prominent diplomats, state dignitaries, and a group of priests from India. This is meant to be the traditional temple, entirely made of stone, imported from Rajasthan, in order to maintain the sanctity of Hindu architecture. This was not an act in exclusivity. The first stone for Shri Swaminarayan Mandir was laid in when the Arab traders and merchants landed at the coast of South India. It was in 629 AD when the first mosque was built in the Indian subcontinent. The Cheraman Juma Masjid built at Kodungallur in Kerala's Thrissur district which became possible due to the broader history of trade and migration from the Arab World. There are archival records, oral histories, tangible heritage, and material culture to substantiate the intimate relationship between the Indian subcontinent and the Arab World, cultivated and preserved over a long century.ⁱⁱ India and the Arab World share a long history of friendship which goes back into history during the times of Silk Route trade.ⁱⁱⁱ

The historical records reveal that the trade linkages were primarily responsible for cultural and artistic transmissions blending the two entities into an everlasting relationship. It is sometimes maintained that the study of Indian Art and Culture is incomplete without studying the Arab aspect. This paper brings forth the fusion of art, culture and tradition between the two entities

from their civilisational past to the present. It is not that only Indian culture and art has received Arab features; instead, Arab culture has been equally impacted by the Indian culture.

India-Arab Relations: A Historical context

A glance into the history of world civilisation reveals some of the prominent human societies have made a tremendous impact on human life and civilisational advancement. The civilisations like Mesopotamian Civilization, Indus/Harrapan Civilization, Nile River etc., consisting of a cluster of societies, spanning over large swaths of land, acted as an umbrella civilisation for these societies which subsequently disintegrated over a period of time.^{iv} The Indian subcontinent, the cradle of Indus Valley Civilization, has had historical ties with the Arab world-extending up to the Iraq and Egypt.

The early records of this interaction were found in the region of Dahwa in Oman where potteries made in the Indus Valley Civilization were unearthed.^v Another earliest record of this interaction comes from Dilmun in Bahrain, which was a port area and was looking after maritime trade between Indian Subcontinent and Mesopotamia. With the passage of time, Yemen and Oman^{vi} emerged as big trading ports and attracted most of the merchants from the Indian subcontinent. In the later period, these two port cities played a critical role in Cultural diffusion, Migration and Diaspora formation around a large swathe of Indian ocean creating a much more significant and more robust network of interaction between different civilisations. By 1 CE, this trade became the wheel of life and economy between India and the Arab World. Furthermore, it was mainly managed by Arab traders.

These commercial and cultural relations between India and Arab World further flourished during sixth and 7th century when a wide variety of Indian goods like spices, perfumes, camphor, sandalwood, medicinal substances, coconut, timber, cloth, and precious stones were exported to Arabia.^{vii} These commodities were also sold in markets of Hadramawt, Suhar, Yemen and Aden in Arabia and from these were further exported to Iran, Egypt and the Byzantine Empire. It is said that people of Indian origin had settled in Arabia even before the 6th century. Even the Prophet Muhammad mentioned about the Indian musk, camphor and costus. He also recommended the costus as a medicine.

This relation further strengthened when a group of Arab merchants took permanent settlement on the eastern coast of India at Malabar in Kerala and Gujarat in the 7th century. This opened a much broader landscape where the cultural, architectural, traditional diffusion will be taking place. This was a juncture in history, when in actual initiated the continuous coming of Arab merchants and traders to India. The migrant population from Arab World wholeheartedly welcomed by locals and was allowed to carry out their activity as everyone. Interestingly, the migrant population quickly adapted indigenous culture, language, rituals and customs, and settled in the social and geographical landscape.

With the establishment of the Delhi sultanate and the coming of Mughal rule in the Indian subcontinent, the relations with the Arab World grew more robust. Several Arab scholars, jurists, scientists, nobles, traders settled in India. They even got the highest position in the administration of the empire, with the coming of British rule, the Indian subcontinent and the Arab World looked alike as a single territory under the British crown- the period of colonialism.

With the formation of the Indian republic and the emergence of new world orders, the network of the relation between countries was structurally redefined. Because the Arab World was no longer a single entity; instead, there emerged a host of countries. In the case of India and the Arab World, the discovery of Oil in Arab World reversed this relationship. The Arab World being an exporter of Oil, holds the upper hand in balance of trade. This was the time when a large number of Indian expatriates travelled to the Arab World in search of jobs. This opened the gate for the redefinition and exchange of culture, arts, and tradition.^{viii}

The glorious history of Indo-Arab relations, which was forged centuries ago through maritime trade, continues to create history in contemporary times. This process became easy due to a long history of interaction which was cultivated and preserved over several centuries. Factors like borrowing and adaptation, accommodation and assimilation, hybridisation and cross-fertilisation of ideas, artefacts, social institutions and cultural patterns act as a wheel for the civilisation to move and evolve. The research-based on archaeological and historical artefacts, philological and linguistic enquiry, textual and literary sources, oral traditions and folklore suggest that Indian civilisation carries impressions of great world civilisation making it very diverse and plural in nature.

Migration and Cultural diffusion

The emergence of the modern nation-state coloured the history of Indo-Arab relation in a bad light. The long history of mutual respect, cultural exchange, is reduced to the distorted history of loot and plunder, foreign invasion and conquests. This was deliberately done by the colonial and nationalist practitioners of history. An attempt was made to strike discord among Muslims and Hindus in India who were living here in communal harmony over a period of time. Both the communities were practising similar rituals and customs.

This led to distortions of history. The historians failed to differentiate various sects of Muslims who came to India. All were put into a single category. For example, the first group of Muslims who settled in India were traders, merchants, scholars and religious teachers. Then came artisans, craftsperson, Sufi saints, and poets. A large scale of migration into Indian subcontinent happened in 13th century due to the Mongol attacks in cities like Samarqand, Bukhara, Hirat, Naishapur, Merv, Balkh and Khwarizm. A large number of artisans, craft worker, and several others took refuge in Indian cities. They went through the process of transformation, adaptation and indigenisation. This resulted in inter-community marriages, exchange of customs and rituals, dilution of cultural traditions, and the emergence of new social groups. Thus in today's time, we find several traits in ritual and customs, food habits, the language which seems to emerge from a common source and a shared legacy for the various communities living in India.^{ix} The interaction between civilisations yields fertile result for everyone. Interaction between peoples and cultures of civilisations leads to the diffusion of ideas, technology, arts and crafts, architectural and literary styles. This is how human civilisation evolves. For example, Arabs exposed Indian subcontinent to medicine, hospitals, public baths, musical instruments, dyes and gun powder, windmills and water wheels, compass, astronomical and surgical instruments, and perfumes and sugar.

Arabs brought water lifting and spinning wheel technology to India. Likewise, the windmill was

invented by the Arab geographer Al-Masudi, who saw it in Persia in 9 AD. After three centuries, the idea of windmill travelled to Europe, and during the same time, it was introduced in India. Not only this, the introduction of several technological devices like the Pedals-which accelerated the speed of weaving-in the looms, Cavalry in Armed combat, Warfare tactics, and the Artillery was due to Arab Muslims. They did the introduction of Sericulture in Kashmir and Bengal. Among the most significant contribution by the Arab World in the Indian Subcontinent was Paper. However, the paper was invented in China in the First Century AD. The Arabs became aware of it during Seventh Century AD and became a source of knowledge transmission for the other world civilisations. The Arabs established the first paper factory in Baghdad in 793 and enhanced the quality and production in fewer resources and using different materials.

Fusion: Culture & Literature Medicine

The cultural exchange, synthesis and dialogue between the Indian subcontinent and Arab World forged relation among scholars and philosophers beyond their own borders led to the creation of a cosmos of knowledge which will be the beacon of hope for the generations to come. Thus Arabs got introduced to the corpus of knowledge from the Indian subcontinent. They translated these troves of knowledge which varies from philosopher's wisdom, mathematical treatise, accounts on medicines, to calculations on astronomy. This was the Golden period for the Indian civilisation, for the Arab civilisation, and for the entire human civilisation.

Later during the Mughal period, a large number of Indian literature got translated into Persian and Arabic. The great Indian texts like Mahabharata, Upanishads, Bhagavad Gita, Bhagavata Purana, and Vedas are few names. For example, Dara Shukoh got Upanishad translated into Persian. Through Persian, it got translated into Latin. When Arthur Schopenhauer read this translation in Germany in the 18th century, he was deeply influenced by the power of words.^x

Al Biruni, 11th-century traveller, was known to be a scholar of Sanskrit, Indian art, literature and science. He even translated several Sanskrit books. His famous Kitab Ta'rikh al-Hind (Book of Indian History, popularly known as Alberuni's India), introduced Arabs to India's scholarly traditions. He identified the similarity between famous Arab stories of Kalila wa Dimna in Indian work Panchtantra. These are not just mere examples but a long history of cultural fusion.^{xi}

Beyond philosophies and fables, some serious works on Mathematics and astronomy got produced in the Sanskrit language. Modern maths and science are inconceivable without the idea of Zero, and this discovered by famous Indian scholars Aryabhata. The Arabs merged it in their knowledge and produced some excellent texts on mathematical calculations. Another Indian scholar, Brahmagupta, developed the decimal system.^{xii} Severus Sebokht, a seventh-century Syrian bishop and natural philosopher wrote of the rivalry: "I will omit all discussion of the science of the Hindus ... their subtle discoveries in the science of astronomy, discoveries which are more ingenious than those of the Greeks and the Babylonians; their valuable method of calculation; their computing that surpasses description. I wish only to say that this computation is done utilising nine signs. If those who believe, because they speak Greek, that they have reached the limits of science, they should know these things."^{xiii}

Al-Khwarizmi, Arab scholar and mathematician, took reference from Mathematical treatises from the Indian subcontinent, is known for introducing Algebra. His work got translated into Latin and spread in Europe. He is also known to have introduced the idea of Sine, borrowed from Aryabhata's work, into the Arab World. One of the important aspect, where Arab scholars tried merging their knowledge with the knowledge from the Indian subcontinent, was Astronomy. For Arabs, the Solar and Lunar cycle were part of everyday routine. Thus, from a very early time, a large number of scholars engaged themselves in Astronomy.

The Arabs got introduced to Brahmagupta's work on Astronomy which allowed them more accurate calculations of the sun, moon, stars, and other planets. It helped Arabs to determine the time cycle of the day. Muhammad ibn Ibrahim al-Fazari, an eighth-century philosopher, mathematician and astronomer, translated Brahmagupta's work into Arabic. Medicine is another such area where this fusion shows remarkable achievements.

Al-beruni too was very much influenced by Indian traditional medicine. He translated text on medicine written in Sanskrit into Arabic. Much before Al-beruni, Al-kindi wrote a medical treatise which consists of a more astonishing percentage of imprints from Indus Valley Civilization, as discovered in the latest research. Al-Tabari, an Arab physician of high stature, refers to Indian physician such as Madhavakara, Susrutta, Caraka, and Vagbhata II in his work on medicine. He talks at length about Ayurvedic medicine, which emerged in Indian territories and spread across continents. These similarities and knowledge production are not mere coincidence. There existed greater participation by people of these distinct civilisations, where the focus was more concentrated on knowledge production and cultural exchange. The thirst to produce something which will be remembered in human history and a legacy for the generations to come. The interactions of Indo-Arab cultures have synthesised both the traditions in harmony and proved fertile for both the cultures equally. This resulted in splendid exchanges. This is the reason, in contemporary times, India and Arab have extraordinary diplomatic relations.

"Indians and the Arabs had, in history, influenced each other deeply in various spheres of life-social, cultural and intellectual." As mentioned, the Arab image of India was one of respect. Alongside there is deep regard amongst the Arabs for Indian philosophy. They continue to admire and have sincere consideration for Indian sciences and arts. Arabs adore the intellect, sagaciousness and the wisdom of the Indian people and their valuable assistance to the advancement of the human civilisation. the cultural accomplishments and the exchanges of both Arabs and Indians with their great civilisation, their association give rise to the formation of an enthusiastic open-mindedness, forbearance and complete acceptance of the people all over the World.^{xiv}

Conclusion

The Arab World and Indian Subcontinent have supplemented each other's social, economic and cultural development. The exchange has been historic and robust that even today both share similarities. The Arab World exchanged Islam with India; in turn, India injected knowledge of medicine and astronomy. Latter with the end of colonialism, changes in global markets and growing interdependence, the Arab World, especially the Gulf region, became a market of the

Indian labour force. India is the receiver of the highest remittances from this region. Besides this Arab World looks towards India for agricultural investments so that their food security is ensured. Indian tradition is highly celebrated in the Arab World, especially in the UAE. The UAE has become an example of this cultural fusion; for example, Indian art and music and Cinema are celebrated and enjoyed. Furthermore, India is considered as a contributor to the multiculturalism and diversification in Arab countries.

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