

History of Multan: Some Reflections

*Dr. M. Aslam Ansari**

It is said that history repeats itself. What exactly this oft-quoted maxim means no one has been able to explain adequately. It is indeed suggestive of recurrence of events or at least some patterns thereof in course of time. But if history (as a chronicle of events taking place in a given period) makes it necessary that it be written and re-written, it seems likely that it does repeat itself, in the works of historians, that is. But in case of Multan, history has hardly repeated itself. Once having been written and made part of some grander scheme of historical works or some times having been reduced to footnotes, it has never been rewritten in entirety. In fact, it consists of fragments that lack coherence and a sense of completeness.

That Multan is one of the oldest habitations of human beings upon the earth, and that throughout the centuries it has held a place of great geographical, historical and cultural importance, is a view unanimously held by the majority of old and modern historians. It can well be said that its history never started, for it existed even before the dawn of history. All archaeological studies and excavations in modern times have proved its antiquity beyond doubt. It is said to have been a contemporary of Harrappa and Moen-Jo-dero. It seems quite likely that even in prehistoric times, Multan was the light and glory of what is called Indus Valley Civilization. In recent past it has sufficiently been proved that Indus Valley Civilization had no foreign origins; it rather sprouted from the soil itself.

Since the advent and advancement of the modern science of languages, and since the introduction of the theory of Indo-European languages, much light has been shed upon the nature of early Indic languages. In view of about two centuries old researches into the Vedic language and literature, it seems now quite probable that not only the early hymns, but the whole text of Rig Veda⁽¹⁾ was composed in or around the area, of which the focal point was the present day Multan. It may even seem strange to some that a derivative of the word “Ved” is still in use in Seraiki, giving the meaning of knowing, knowledge and a process of analysis. Of late some historians have held that not only the hymns of Rig Veda but also the early works of a great grammarian Panini⁽²⁾ were composed at a place not far from the eastern suburbs of Multan. It can be clearly inferred that such works of marked literary value and philosophic depth can only be produced in a social climate of definite sophistication and cultural refinement. And they could not be preserved through oral tradition only. Their preservation and transmission to the subsequent generations must have required a certain form of a script. A script not dissimilar to the early script of Sanskrit might have been in use even before Rig Veda came to be. But what type of this early or proto-Sanskrit script, so to say, might have been cannot be said with any degree of certainty.

* Associate Professor of Urdu (R), Formerly Resident Director of Multan Arts Council.

Even before the Greek invasion of the northeastern part of the sub-continent, Multan is said to have been a part or province of the Achaemenian Empire of ancient Persia. It was, in fact, the Greek historians, Herodotus and Arrian, with whose writings the actual history of Multan began. But there are so many missing links yet. How the twin mounds came to be on which the city and the citadel have stood through at least two thousand years,⁽⁴⁾ or exactly when the temple of sun-god was erected for the first time, and whether it was built in the city or the citadel, are questions which can not be answered with much authenticity.

The Arab conquest of Sind and Multan in the eighth century brought the floodlight of modern history to Multan making it an Arab-Islamic State or province for about three hundred years. Banu-Sama's rule at Multan seems to be the longest. Mahmood's invasions and final conquest of Multan, made it a very important province of Ghaznavid kingdom that later stretched to Lahore and Delhi. But it was during the Sultanate period that Multan reached the apex of prominence⁽⁴⁾. At one time in history, Multan once again became an independent state under the rule of Nasiruddin Qabaacha who held his court simultaneously at Multan and Uchh. *Tazkirah Lubab-ul-Albab*⁽⁵⁾ and *Chach Nama*⁽⁶⁾ were written or at least completed at Multan and presented and dedicated to Qabaacha, who finally lost his newly founded principedom to Eltutmish, the ruler of Delhi.

Its unique strategic position as the front-line stronghold of the Sultanate of Delhi as against the onslaughts of Mongol invaders and their permanent menace made Multan an increasingly important place. As a cultural center and a great seat of learning, with spiritual and religious overtones, it attracted students from far off places of Central Asia and Far East. In thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, Multan owed its importance to such saintly figures as Sheikh Bahauddin Zakariya Multani, his illustrious son and grandson Sheikh Sadruddin Arif and Sheikh Rukn-e-Alam. During the early centuries of Muslim rule in the sub-continent, Multan seems to have served as a great and living spring-well of the Islamic culture that was to impart a typical coloring to the whole history and culture of Muslim India. The Sultanate period gave Multan a great architectural heritage, of which Multan can be rightly proud; and which includes such monuments of architectural beauty and grandeur as the mausoleum of Hazrat Rukn-e-Alam that still stands as the great edifice of pre-Mughal architectural tradition and imparts to Multan its splendor and historic authenticity.

In between the period of Delhi Sultanate administration and the Mughal Empire interceded two rather brief interludes of Langahs and Arghuns who made Multan a sovereign state. The Langahs are said to have ruled with sagacity and to have "bestowed peace and prosperity" upon Multan. These two periods have not been studied at great length except for some recent works on Langahs, based primarily on *Tarikh-e-Farishta*.⁽⁷⁾

Multan continued to enjoy its position as a province of great political and cultural importance during the long period of great Mughals and their successors. The list of

Multan's governors in the Mughal period includes the names of such eminent personages as:

1. Muhammad Quli Khan Barlas Barmaki
2. Abdul Rahim Khan-e-Khanan
3. Khan-e-Jahan Lodhi
4. Qalij Khan Torani
5. Aurang Zeb Alamgir – later to become the emporor
6. Jahandar Shah – also later to become the king of Delhi and
7. Nawab Abdul Samad Khan.⁽⁸⁾

The above-mentioned governors hardly resided in Multan, their preoccupations at the Delhi court being of more importance. Moreover, none of these representatives of the Mughal court seems to have developed personal relationship to the province they governed from distance. Only Aurangzeb, at one time, stayed here consecutively for two years. But then, in fact, he was waiting for an appropriate time to proceed to Qandhar (mid 17th century). Aurangzeb had some liking and regard for the place as a centre of religio-mystical culture. That is why, when later he became the emperor, he reserved the whole of the revenue of the Multan province to be spent in the building of the great Badshahi mosque in Lahore. Thus it was that multan played its historic role in the building of this grand edifice of great cultural and architectural value. Prince Murad, as governor resident, also stayed here for quite some time and had the rampart of the city re-built and improved upon. The rampart, locally known as Alang,⁽⁹⁾ is a surviving monument of great architectural value, though mostly damaged and only recently rebuilt in parts. One thing is very clear; Multan was never reduced to insignificance and its governorship throughout remained a prize-post bestowed only on the near and dears of the emperor of Delhi.

Nawab Abdul Samad Khan had the dual charge of the Lahore and Multan provinces and also had the privilege of building Multan's monumental Eid Gah, the only piece of later Mughal architecture which survived the Sikh and British onslaughts. It is a point to ponder that except for the Eid Gah, Multan has not been able to retain any Mughal monuments that might have been constructed in the citadel or the city of Multan. Nawab Abdul Samad Khan also permanently resided in Lahore and visited Multan only occasionally.

Multan is said to be the birthplace of at least two kings-to-be, i.e., Bahlol Lodi and Ahmad Shah Abdali, the founder of modern Afghanistan. After the decay and disintegration of the Mughal Empire and weakening of Delhi administration, the governorship of Multan became a precarious job. Governors, though, were still being appointed by the crumbling Mughal Court at Delhi but, in short intervals, quite a few had their *farmans* of appointment issued from Kabul also.

Multan under Afghans, somehow or the other, presented the last episode of Muslim/Afghan valor and their will to survive against the odds of Time. This state of affairs continued, till the last Afghan ruler of Multan, Nawab Muzaffar Khan Safdar

Jang was martyred in the battlefield, in the year 1818, while defending the fort of Multan, which was ultimately lost to the Sikh armies of Ranjit Singh, and later to their British successors. The victory sign of the British invaders, a sword like obelisk, has been standing at the top of the ruined and destroyed citadel of Multan for little more than one and a half-century. After the independence from the foreign rule, began a new era of Multan's modern history which is also waiting for the quill of an historian.

With the advent of modern technologies and increasing economic activity, the old structural landscape of Multan is being superimposed by multi-story buildings and modern constructions. But some of the old buildings or historical sites could have been saved or still can be saved as architectural heritage of the region. Among such monuments are the surviving gates of the old walled city. They are three in all, though not all the three belong to the olden times. *Haram Gate* and *Delhi Gate* were entirely rebuilt in late 1950s and '60s. The only one that is reminiscent of the colonial era is the *Bohar Gate*, which so piteously is decaying and crumbling with no one to look at it sympathetically or feel nostalgic about it. I don't think it got any face-lift during the past two decades or so.

Multan has a great literary and academic past right from the early pre-Islamic periods to the recent times. *Al-beruni*, one of the greatest mathematical prodigies the world of Islam ever produced, discussed, while at Multan, the profoundest mathematical problems with the native Hindu scholars and never hinted he found them naive. The famous Persian poets Iraqi and Mir Sadaat Hussain stayed in Multan for considerably long periods. Hazrat Amir Khusrau and his beloved friend Hassan Dehlavi also stayed here for years as the courtiers of Sultan-e-Shaheed and composed a considerable part of their verses here. The contribution of Multani scholars and *Ulema* to the sum total of Islamic learning in the sub-continent is in no way meager or negligible. Similarly, during the past four or five decades, the contribution of poets, writers and intellectual to the cultural and intellectual milieu of modern Multan is simply tremendous, but rarely acknowledged and scarcely rewarded. Much of the present intellectual prominence of Multan is understandably due to the esteemed Bahauddin Zakariya University, the prime seat of learning in the region, apart from other meritorious institutions and organization as well as individual writers, scholars, poets, artists and people from all walks of life, who are contributing their bit to make Multan a modern, contemporary city.

References:

1. Veda: Skt. Lit. Knowledge (Oxford Dictionary Old Edition). See also for some details Allama Atique Fikri's Naqsh-e-Multan Vol.II based on an Urdu translation *Vedic India*.
2. This is a hypothetical statement subject to further research and studies.
3. See relevant portion of *Tabaqat-e-Nasiri* and *Tarikh-e-FerozeShahi*.

4. Syed Muhammad Latif describes this “rising ground” as “the accumulated debris of ages.” *The Early History of Multan*, Lahore, 1965, P.1.
5. *Lubabul Albab* by Muhammad Awfi, edited by E.G. Browne, 1903.
6. *Chah Nama* or *Fatah Nama*: the first and foremost history of the Arab conquest of Sind and Multan. The original being in Arabic, it was translated in Persian in about 613 A.H. by Ali Kufi. An authentic Urdu translation by Akhtar Rizavi was published by Sind Adabi Board Haiderabad (Sind) in 1963.
7. *Tarikh-e-Farista* by Muhammad Qasim Huda Shah (1570-1611).
8. Ahmed Nabi, Dr. Multan: History and Architecture (Chapter-VI) Islamabad, 1983.
9. *Alang*: a word of Turco-Persian origin, meaning a park and / or a wall of some strength and height. This word was also part of Dakkani Urdu.