How to counter colonial myths about Muslim arrival in Sindh

FRREEING HISTORY

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 polities. 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 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 Burns, 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 polities. 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.
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, the scholar-warrier 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 history of conqueror Muslim tyranny. In his declaration of 1842 to “all Princes and Chiefs and People of 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, Maharashtra Sayajirao University of Baroda and Osmania University. Shibli Nomani (1857–1914), Jadunath Sarkar and the figure of the 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 40 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—made his case to contemporaneous 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.

Yet this ‘origins’ narrative was based on the false categorisation of Chachnama. It reads unlike any other early Muslim source written in India 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 Sind and Gujarat—such as Dayalpur, Du and Thane—and the Arab 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 misunderstood 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. 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 these 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 historiographic works on the early Muslim state in India, highlighting the earliest links between the two regions. Naived and Abdul Hamid 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 R J Hardy have all written numerous articles and books on Chachnama. They all agree that Smith’s military conquest by Muhammad bin Qasim heralded Muslim arrival in India.

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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 2017. As a pivot, Bede’s treatise offers helpful information on this 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 Mohejpura 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. 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 *Chachchuma*. 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 characterized the Arab rulers 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.