

A critical Appraisal of al-Masudi's Perception of Northern India: A Special Study on Multan

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Abstract:

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. Lul 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.