

AL-BĪRŪNĪ, SULTAN MAḤMŪD AL-GHAZNAWĪ  
AND ISLAMIC UNIVERSALISM:  
THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT

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**Abstract**

*By referring to certain politico-economic factors as a means to justify his work, this paper argues that al-Bīrūnī's framing of his *Tahqīq mā li al-Hind* (AlBeruni's India) was a religious interpretation of the events surrounding Sultan Maḥmūd al-Ghaznawī's Somanāth campaign and does not bear in mind the broader canvas of Muslim-Hindu relations. This is argued by the fact that al-Bīrūnī's the only sustained reference to Sultan Maḥmūd is the *Tahqīq* in reference to his decisions pertaining to the destruction, looting, and subsequent humiliation of the Somanāth līnga. Al-Bīrūnī's claim of Maḥmūd's destruction of Hindu economic prosperity, his heavy handed treatment of Hindus, and the profound Hindu hatred of Muslims all seem to be consequences resulting from the events that transpired on the Somanāth campaign, as opposed to a more general appreciation of Muslim-Hindu relations. Moreover, the paper argues that al-Bīrūnī's interpretation of these events in this manner must be understood in reference to the intended purpose of the *Tahqīq*, namely a treatise aimed at promoting meaningful and sophisticated Muslim-Hindu engagement based on a tacit acknowledgement and subtle propagation of Islam's universalistic assumptions. This interpretation of al-Bīrūnī explains why he chose to ignore the many existing platforms upon which Muslims and Hindus appeared to have developed working relationships. This paper brings to light various Muslim-Hindu relationships to ensure al-Bīrūnī is not misunderstood*

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and that his framing of Maḥmūd should not be generalised to all forms of Muslim-Hindu engagement. Rather, al-Bīrūnī was concerned with the meaningful advancement of Muslim-Hindu relations for which he chose to focus on representing Islam as a somewhat open religious and intellectual framework to appropriate various aspects of Hindu learning. It is in this manner that the universalism of Islam is emphasised

**Key Words:** al-Bīrūnī, Sultan Maḥmūd, Islamic universalism, Somanāth

## Introduction

The idea of Islamic universalism in al-Bīrūnī's *Tahqīq* is significantly embedded in evidences found in the introductory chapters of this major treatise. Although the methodology designed and adopted by al-Bīrūnī when approaching the study of Hindus and Hinduism is central to the theme of Islamic universalism, such a discussion is preceded by its historical settings. These settings pertain to the politico-economic settings of the budding Ghaznavid Empire under the leadership of Sultan Maḥmūd al-Ghaznavī (d. 1030 AD). A thorough investigation of these factors is required for an accurate reading of al-Bīrūnī's *Tahqīq*.

By way of justification, al-Bīrūnī positioned his narrative against several key factors. He purposely identified the issue of Islamic governance as embodied in the leadership of Sultan Maḥmūd, the socio-economic devastation that threatened Hindu prosperity,<sup>3</sup> and the socio-religious dichotomy between Muslims and Hindus. From al-Bīrūnī's account of these platforms of Muslim-Hindu engagement, readers are left with an indeed dire environment in which Muslims and Hindus seem to live completely separate lives

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<sup>3</sup> "Maḥmūd utterly ruined the prosperity of the country (Hind) and performed there wonderful exploits, by which the Hindus became like atoms of dust scattered in all directions, and like a tale of old in the mouth of the people. Their scattered remains cherish, of course, the most inveterate aversion towards Muslims." <sup>3</sup> Sachau, Vol. 1, 25. and Al-Bīrūnī, *Tahqīq*, 12

and any and all interaction seems to favour the Muslims due to their political domination and military prowess.<sup>4</sup> The single glaring fault of the Hindus seems to be their attitude towards Muslims and all foreigners for that matter,<sup>5</sup> which is not conducive to dialogue or mutual understanding. What is curious however is that research on these factors reveals many instances of what appear to be cordial relations between Muslims and Hindus. Contrary to al-Bīrūnī's representation, so numerous are the evidences of these realities that claiming al-Bīrūnī's ignorance of such matters is untenable. An alternative explanation is therefore required, for which this paper endeavours to provide.

As a preliminary, one must first acknowledge that the highly technical nature of the *Tahqīq* in addition to its thorough subjection to the standards of objectivity is good indication that the targeted readership of this work were learned Muslims. If this can be accepted, then the contrast of the Greek civilization with that of the Hindu civilization becomes relevant. Having been exposed to the contributions of the Hindu civilization to astronomy early in his life, al-Bīrūnī was aware that similar to Greece, India managed many attainments in the various sciences and therefore had much to contribute to human learning. However, as familiar as Muslims were with the Greek heritage, they were little conscious of Hindu learning. There was therefore a need to present Hindu learning to an audience of learned Muslims, if only to draw their attention to the fact that

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<sup>4</sup> According to al-Bīrūnī, "All these events planted a deeply rooted hatred in their hearts." Sachau, Vol. 1, 21. and Al-Bīrūnī, *Tahqīq*, 11

<sup>5</sup> "...all their fanaticism is directed against those who do not belong to them—against all foreigners. They call them *mleccha*, i.e. impure, and forbid having any connection with them, be it by intermarriage or any other kind of relationship, or by sitting, eating, and drinking with them, because thereby, they think, they would be polluted. They consider as impure anything which touches the fire and the water of a foreigner; and no household can exist without these two elements." Sachau, Vol. 1, 20. and Al-Bīrūnī, *Tahqīq*, 10; In reference to the causes of hatred, al-Bīrūnī also mentions, "...there are other causes. The mentioning of which sounds like a satire—peculiarities of their national character, deeply rooted in them, but manifest to everybody. We can only say, folly is an illness for which there is no medicine, and the Hindus believe that there is no country but theirs, no nation like theirs, no kings like theirs, no religion like theirs, no science like theirs. They are haughty, foolishly vain, self-conceited, and stolid." Sachau, Vol. 1, 22. and Al-Bīrūnī, *Tahqīq*, 11

there is much more to Hinduism than its palpable idolatry. However, unlike Muslim exposure to Greek learning, the Hindu intellectual legacy existed in a living civilization; one with which the Muslims were now at war with and in which they were beginning to call home. There was therefore a need to propose an approach to the study of Hinduism that would include ways in which they could be engaged practically and upon foundations conducive to a sincere and lasting cross-cultural relationship. Therefore, the religious foundations of Hindu sciences was emphasised not only by way of academic accuracy, but also for its practical value for promoting Muslim-Hindu exchange that would agree with both Muslim and Hindu religious sensitivities.<sup>6</sup>

Contrasting al-Bīrūnī's narrative against the broader landscape of political and human interactions between the Muslims and Hindus, the many presumptions of that period that have seemingly been accepted *a priori* by the majority, if not all, of the studies on al-Bīrūnī are addressed. From here, this paper seeks to demonstrate that although on the face of it, al-Bīrūnī appears to have supported what may perhaps be considered the canonisation of how Muslim-Hindu relations during the 10-11<sup>th</sup> century has come to be understood, namely the characteristic iconoclasm of Sultan Maḥmūd and his severe treatment of Hindus, the economic devastation associated with Maḥmūd's campaigns, and a profound antagonism between Muslims and Hindus, al-Bīrūnī's motives in making such claims were a reflection of consequences of a single event, namely the campaign of Somanāth and should not be interpreted as a description of the practical relations between Muslims and Hindus. Arguing this claim will consist of a collection of evidences that establish, beyond fear of contradiction, that the practical realities of the three aforementioned factors differed completely to al-Bīrūnī's account.

In short, this paper seeks to better understand al-Bīrūnī's framework by questioning the finality of his assertions concerning Maḥmūd's governance of Hindus, the devastation of Hindu economic

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<sup>6</sup> For a contrast between Greek and Hindu learning, see. Franz Rosenthal, 'Al-Bīrūnī between Greece and India.' in *Science and Medicine in Islam*. (U.K.: Variorum, 1991).

prosperity, and the social schism between Muslims and Hindus. From this endeavour, it is hoped that the political, economic, and social contexts can be better appreciated and more accurately understood. More importantly, a new understanding of the *Tahqīq* is offered that would place the *Tahqīq* in its correct perspective while making sense of what many have misunderstood as the al-Bīrūnī's disparate narrative of Hindus and Hinduism.

### **Sachau's Overstatement of Maḥmūd**

There is little doubting the lasting contributions of the most scholarly Professor. Edward Sachau to the study of al-Bīrūnī. Without his pioneering work, one may question whether or not al-Bīrūnī would be known to the world in the way he is known today. However, despite his prominence in the study of al-Bīrūnī, his introduction to the translation of the *Tahqīq*, although very insightful, seems very much focused on contrasting Maḥmūd as the complete opposite of al-Bīrūnī. Where al-Bīrūnī was open and objective, Maḥmūd was bigoted and oppressive. Doubtless al-Bīrūnī differed from Maḥmūd in many aspects, the attention given to Maḥmūd in Sachau's introduction is rather disproportionate and distracts from the more important issue of al-Bīrūnī's purpose of the *Tahqīq* and his intended readership. Sachau's references to Maḥmūd clearly emphasised the issue of Muslim antagonism of Hindus and that al-Bīrūnī was the exception. This can be seen in statements such as, "If the author and his countrymen had suffered and were still suffering from the oppression of King Maḥmūd, the Hindus were in the same position... To Maḥmūd, the Hindus were infidels, to be dispatched to hell as soon as they refused to be plundered."<sup>7</sup> "...trodden down by the savage hordes of King Maḥmūd..."<sup>8</sup> "The author has nothing in common the Muhamadan Ghazi who wanted to convert the Hindus or to kill them."<sup>9</sup> There is little balance in Sachau's estimation of Maḥmūd. Admittedly, the little reference al-Bīrūnī made to him was not very positive, it was not this dire, indication that much of this was the interpretation of Sachau. What concerns us here is that Sachau

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<sup>7</sup> Sachau, Vol. 1, xvii.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, Vol. 1, xix.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. Vol. 1, xxiii.

did not sufficiently focus on the religious and scholastic dimensions of al-Bīrūnī's narrative. The axiological significance of the narrative for example is almost entirely ignored. One would have expected that a comparison with the Muslim engagement with the Hellenic tradition would have been a more fitting component to introduce the *Tahqīq* in its correct perspective rather than a preoccupation with Maḥmūd as a Muslim conqueror.

### **The Religious Dimension as Embodied in Maḥmūd's treatment of Somanāth**

The location of Somanāth was earlier referred to as Prabhasa Pattana, a well-known *tirtha* or place of pilgrimage in Saurashtra. According to al-Bīrūnī, the origins of the Somanāth temple can be found in an ancient Hindu legend in which Prajâpati, the father of the lunar stations, curses Soma, a deity associated with the moon, who was married to Prajâpati's daughters, for causing disorder in the lunar stations by preferring Rohiṇî over her sisters. The curse caused Soma's face to become leprous. Soma became penitent and in order that its shame is covered for half of every month, Prajâpati requested that a temple be erected as an object of the worship of the moon. Al-Bīrūnī says,

...Thereupon the moon spoke to Prajâpati: "But how shall the trace of the sin of the past be wiped off from me?" Prajâpati answered: "By erecting the shape of the liṅga of Mahâdeva as an object of thy worship." This he did. The liṅga he raised was the stone of Somanâth, for soma means the moon and nâtha means master, so that the whole word means master of the moon.<sup>10</sup>

Al-Bīrūnī further explains that,

"...the liṅga of Somanâth was originally erected on the coast, a little less than three miles west of the mouth of the river Sarustî, east of the golden fortress Bârôi...Each time when the moon rises and sets, the water of the ocean rises in

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<sup>10</sup> Sachau, *India*. Vol. 2, 102-103. Al-Bīrūnī, *Tahqīq*. 390.

the flood so as to cover the place in question. When, then, the moon reaches the meridian of noon and midnight, the water recedes in the ebb, and the place becomes visible. Thus the moon was perpetually occupied in serving the idol and bathing it. Therefore the place was sacred to the moon.”<sup>11</sup>

As regards to the practical religious devotion the Somanāth Temple received and its eminence in the religious conscience of Hindus, al-Bīrūnī says,

In the south-west of the Sindh country this idol is frequently met with in the houses destined for the worship of the Hindus, but Somanāth was the most famous of these places. Every day they brought there a jug of Ganges water and a basket of flowers from Kashmir. They believed that the līnga of Somanāth would cure persons of every inveterate illness and heal every desperate and incurable disease.<sup>12</sup>

This passage, along with the passage that provides a detailed description for the construction of the līnga that precedes it, indicate the religious importance awarded to the temple of Somanāth from the perspective of Hindu legends and religious texts and from the practices and attitudes of the Hindus during al-Bīrūnī’s era. Doubtless, it formed a place of pilgrimage and as such would have formed a meeting point for many groups from various regions. Moreover, the spirit of pilgrimage dulls the edge of social differentiations and sectarian demarcations to effect a community united by common religious purpose who would relate to each other as equals irrespective of their sectarian or caste identities. Such a centre must have attracted a number of religious adherents from near and far. Based on this, it is hard to perceive the destruction and subsequent humiliation of the temple by Sultan Maĥmūd as being other than an act of iconoclasm aroused by religious fervour. Al-Bīrūnī advocated that it was a humiliating act, however, he was

<sup>11</sup> Sachau, *India*. Vol. 2, 105. Al-Bīrūnī, *Tahqīq*. 391

<sup>12</sup> Sachau, *India*. Vol. 2, 104. Al-Bīrūnī, *Tahqīq*. 390

careful not to attribute the act to any single motive and opted to remain silent on the issue. He neither argued for or against the destruction of the temple, but one can't help but feel that al-Bīrūnī believed it to have left a bad taste in the mouths of the Hindus irrespective of the motive. Al-Bīrūnī's attitude neatly suits the postulated argument that his treatise on the Hindus was predominantly aimed towards an exposition on Islamic universalism as the event is much more nuanced than al-Bīrūnī's description of events.

In 1026, the Ghaznavids raided Western India which resulted in a general exodus of Hindu religious symbols. Of this al-Bīrūnī says,

The image was destroyed by the Prince Maḥmūd-may God be merciful to him!—A.H. 416. He ordered the upper part to be broken and the remainder to be transported to his residence, Ghaznin, with all its coverings and trappings of gold, jewels, and embroidered garments. Part of it has been thrown into the hippodrome of the town, together with the *Cakrasvāmin*, an idol of bronze, that had been brought from Tāneshar. Another part of the idol from Somanāth lies before the door of the mosque of Ghaznin, on which people rub their feet to clean from the dirt and wet.<sup>13</sup>

To debase and humiliate an enemy's sign of prosperity and religious symbols can hardly be considered out of the norm during that period. Governing Muslim authorities treated in an equal fashion Muslims they considered as heretics or threats to their rule. However, for the *līṅga* to have been placed on display in Ghaznah's hippodrome in front of all Muslims and for its doors to have been made a floor mat for the grand *maṣjid* of Ghaznah, the *līṅga* of Somanāth must have had some added significance that distinguished it from other *līṅgas* dedicated to the worship of Mahādeva that were ignored by Maḥmūd. Perhaps the reason for such exclusive treatment can be found in al-Bīrūnī's statement; "The reason why in particular Somanāth has become so famous is that it was a harbour for seafaring

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<sup>13</sup> Sachau, *India*. Vol. 2, 104. Al-Bīrūnī, *Tahqīq*. 390



people, and a station for those who went to and fro between Sufāla in the country of Zanj and China.”<sup>14</sup> Being an active port, its fame was probably carried to distant ports through sailors who worshiped the liṅga of Somanāth. By destroying this temple not only is Maḥmūd replacing Somanāth’s fame with his own, he is also curtailing the potential religious threat of Hindu beliefs spreading to ports between China and Africa. Based on evidence suggested by Farrukhī Sistānī, who claims that he accompanied Maḥmūd to Somanāth, Nāzim further adds that the devotees of this idol, in their attempt to rationalise why other idols had been destroyed and their religion humiliated, boasted that the only reason for this was due to Somanāth’s displeasure with them. The aim of this boast was to lift the spirits of Hindus who had fallen of late to a confound state of melancholy which led to a significant increase in the numbers of pilgrims to Somanāth especially at the time of the lunar eclipse.<sup>15</sup> This further convinced Maḥmūd of the need to strike a decisive blow to the Hindu conscience in regards to the worship of idols while at the same time establishing Muslim authority (perhaps Maḥmūd’s authority) in the region. Through an exhibition of his military prowess, Sultan Maḥmūd effectively reminded the Rajput kingdoms that had signed treaties with the Ghaznavids of the consequences of reneging on their agreements.

The raid on Somanāth by Maḥmūd is a fact but what is of greater interest is the question of how this event has been interpreted. In one way or another, such interpretations contribute towards defining Muslim-Hindu relations, which, it seems, often served some political purpose. Why for example has Maḥmūd continually been pictured as a warmonger; inadvertently suggesting that Islam is brutal and Islamic governance uncompromising? Interpretations of Maḥmūd’s expeditions into India and his governance of Hindus are wrapped up in the histories of communities and their identities which lend themselves to descriptive narratives that reflect a variety of interests. Some of these are sober descriptions while others are exaggerated and at times fabricated narratives. It would appear that al-Bīrūnī himself was not immune from depicting Maḥmūd’s

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<sup>14</sup> Sachau, *India*. Vol. 2, 104. Al-Bīrūnī, *Tahqīq*. 390

<sup>15</sup> Nāzim, *The Life and Times*. 210-211

governance with a particular interest in mind, namely to neatly frame his discussion on Islamic universalism. The accounts of Maḥmūd's reign appear to suffer from inconsistencies particularly in regards to his management of the Hindus. One expects some consistency in the various accounts of what happened so that fantasy can be sifted from fact, but the variations are quite striking.

Perhaps a good place to begin in elucidating the many voices of Muslim-Hindu relations as embodied by Maḥmūd is al-Utbi's account of Maḥmūd's activities in the *Tarikh-i-Yamini*, written in 1031. As the official chronicler of Maḥmūd's life, al-Utbi was clearly preoccupied with the narrative more than the actual facts. His literary style is poetic with a noticeable tendency to render all Maḥmūd's activities as epic. From al-Utbi's account of Muslim-Hindu relations, Hindus were seen as infidels and Maḥmūd the poster child of Islam with the specific honour and responsibility to personally oversee the eradication of idol worship and the establishment of Islam. There is a clear lack of detail in al-Utbi's narrative and the ornate and often verbose style of the author leads one to imagine that this narrative was designed to elevate and advance Maḥmūd in the eyes of Muslims, more specifically the eyes of the Caliph in Baghdad. The following passage sums up Muslim-Hindu relations according to al-Utbi,

“He (Maḥmūd) therefore commanded the army to fly forth into the provinces of Hindustan, and took possession of those territories. And with regard to all the soldiers of India in the hills and castles of those frontiers who stirred up violence, and wickedness, and perverseness, he made them all the food of swords and the subjects of justice; and he claimed the imputation of merit for filthy ungodliness, and thus with glorious victories, and illustrious conduct, he arrived at his capital, making the rosy cheek of Islam brilliant with the rosy blush of victory, and the broke the back of the innovators and idolaters with the sword of vengeance.”<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup>Abū al-Nasr 'Abd al-Jabbār al-'Utbi , *Kitab -i-Yamini Historical Memoirs of The*

A similar account of Muslim-Hindu relations is presented in the poetry of Farrukhi Sistani who was a major poet of the eastern Islamic world and was attached at the court of Ghaznah, which was fast becoming the focus of an extensive empire. He excelled in the literary form known as the qasidah (lyrical eulogies) and even if given to exaggeration, was regarded as among the finest poetry on Persian at that time. Many of his qasidahs or eulogies are on his patron, Maḥmūd. Farrukhi claims that he accompanied Maḥmūd on his campaign to Somanāth and provides an itinerary but there is no blow-by-blow eyewitness account as might be expected. Of Maḥmūd, he writes, “*You have emptied the lands of India of fighting men and horrendous elephants.*”<sup>17</sup> The flattery of the poet helped in building an image of Maḥmūd as a person of considerable accomplishment.

Another contemporary authority is Gardīzi. His writing is more prosaic but he does collate some information on Indian society and caste which suggests that there was a fair degree of interest in the people who lived in northern India.<sup>18</sup> Gardīzi was drawing on earlier writers, some of whom had visited India in search of information on medicinal plants and on various religious beliefs and practices. Indian scholars resident at the court of Hārūn al-Rashīd in Baghdad in earlier times, had discussed Indian mathematics, astronomy and medicine with their Arab counterparts and doubtless the curiosity on both sides still continued.

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*Amir Sabaktagin, and the Sultan Mahmud of Ghazna, Early Conquerors of Hindustan, and the Founders of the Ghaznavid Dynasty.* Translated from Persian by Rev. James Reynolds. Oriental Translation Fund of Great Britain and Ireland: London. p. 284

Please note that this translation by Rev. James Reynolds of al-Jurbādhqānī's Persian translation into English has been met with some criticism. Nāzīm says of his translation, “The translation of Jurbādhqānī into English by Rev. James Reynolds is hopelessly incorrect.” Nāzīm, M. (1971). *The Life and Times of Sulṭān Maḥmūd of Ghazna.* Munshiram Mahoharlal: New Delhi. p. 5.

<sup>17</sup> Scot-Meisami, ‘Ghaznavid Panegyrics: Some Political Implications’. *Iran: Journal of the British Institute of Persian Studies.* (London: British Institute of Persian Studies, 1990), Vol. 28. 31-40

<sup>18</sup> V. Minorsky. ‘Gardizi on India’ *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* (London :School of Oriental and African Studies, 1948), Vol. 12, 625-640

Maḥmūd's Indian expeditions were successful and he carried back with him to Ghaznah enormous amounts of loot. He destroyed a good number of idols among them the venerable lingham located at Somanāth, which the Hindus had asserted was their chief idol capable of reinstating Hindu pride after the mass desecration of their temples and religious symbols by Maḥmūd's armies. On his return journey from Somanāth, Maḥmūd took a route through the difficult environment of Kaccha and Sind, explained by some as due to his fleeing from the Chaulukya king who decided to pursue him, but Maḥmūd escaped. Maḥmūd must have felt that his mission was accomplished and thus his return was merited. That this took place after the conquest of Somanāth is somewhat curious. It suggests that something was achieved at Somanāth but we are left to wonder as to what that might be. Was Maḥmūd's disapproval of Hindu idol-worship appeased by the destruction of their chief idol, or was it the lure of wealth and booty, or possibly even the wish to intervene in the Arab supply of horses to western India which might have threatened the trade in horses going through Ghaznah, or did he intend the acquisition of special elephants for his army,<sup>19</sup> or was it a combination of all these features? In view of these considerations, there are certainly reasons other than iconoclasm that prompted Maḥmūd to wage campaigns against the Hindus and annex resource rich Indian territories. One may ask at this juncture if al-Bīrūnī's failure to mention such motives results from his belief that such were trivial and that Maḥmūd's underlying attitude, which presumably represented the official attitude of the empire, needed to be rectified.

Returning from the Somanāth campaign via Sind, Maḥmūd faced an Isma'ili centre at Mansura. Attacking him caused much destruction all around.<sup>20</sup> Implicit in the narratives of these attacks on non-Sunni Muslims is a hint of the fear of the heretic. Such a fear was perhaps based on there having been many movements regarded as heresies against orthodox Islam in the previous two centuries some of which were politically hostile to the Caliph.<sup>21</sup> Earlier, Maḥmūd

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<sup>19</sup> Bosworth. *The Ghaznavids*. 116

<sup>20</sup> Wink. *Al-Hind the Making of the Indo-Islamic World*. Vol. 1, 184-189, 217-218

<sup>21</sup> Arnold Hottinger. *The Arabs: Their History, Culture and Place in the Modern World*. (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1982), p. 86

had attacked Multan, ruled by an Isma'ili ruler, a sect which was anathema to the Sunni Maḥmūd. He had then discontinued the use of the Isma'ili mosque but did not destroy it, and the Sunni mosque was put into use. This gave Maḥmūd the excuse to attack Multan again and put the Isma'ili Muslims to death. Multan was a rich city and the attack resulted in more plunder for Maḥmūd. The Isma'ilis, whose major concern was trade, were however able to rehabilitate themselves through their trading contacts.<sup>22</sup> Again, this is said to be a victory for Sunni Islam, but it also brought considerable wealth and would have affected the Arab trade in Sind for a while. His letters to the Caliph suggest a person who combines flattery with an aggressive self-righteousness, claiming that he has set forth exactly what God gave him the power to do in bringing victory to the Caliphate. Not only did Maḥmūd attack the Hindus, well-known idol-worshippers, but was also able to carry out the command of the Prophet regarding the destruction of idols and, further, was exterminating Muslim heretics. This was not intended to equalize the killing of Hindus with Muslims, but to claim a double championship. Maḥmūd himself, while communicating his victories to the Caliphate, exaggerated the size, wealth and religious importance of the Somanāth temple and implied that his action had considerable political and religious significance. Not surprisingly, he became the recipient of grandiose titles from the Caliph.<sup>23</sup> This established his legitimacy in the Islamic world and perhaps explains why, although other idols were broken by him and temples plundered, the event at Somanāth carries a special importance and is more frequently quoted.

By considering the sectarian differences among Muslims and Muslim rule in the regions of Central Asia and India, Maḥmūd's vehement support of Sunni Islam appears to have been partly

<sup>22</sup> Wink. *Al-Hind the Making of the Indo-Islamic World*. Vol. 1, 218

<sup>23</sup> Ibn Jawzī, Abī al-Farj 'Abd al-Rahmān 'Alī bin Muḥammad. D. 597. *Al-Muntaẓam fī Tārīkh al-Mulūk wa al-Umam*. (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyyah, 1992), 84, 125, 133, 159, 246; Nāẓim, *The Life and Times*. 165; Bosworth. *The Ghaznavids*. 53; Mohammad Habib. Sultan Mahmud of Ghaznin. (New Delhi: S. Chand & Co., 1967), 2; Clifford E. Bosworth 'Mahmud of Ghazna in Contemporary Eyes and in Later Persian literature' *Iran: Journal of the British Institute of Persian Studies*. (London: British Institute of Persian Studies, 1966), Vol. 4, 85-92

religious but clearly political as well. The fierce competition between the Sunni caliphate seated in Baghdad and the Fatimid caliphates in Cairo, especially in the frontier regions of Islam, further explain the rhetoric of conquest and Maḥmūd's staunch support for Sunni Islam. The rivalry between Baghdad and Cairo over the legitimacy of the Caliphate impinged on the politics of eastern Islam. Maḥmūd along with his chroniclers would have no doubt played up this rhetoric for the purpose of earning the pleasure of the Caliph in Baghdad as a means to legitimize his position as the Sultan, who physically usurped his brother's throne, and to consolidate his authority in the eyes of his subjects and neighbouring kingdoms.<sup>24</sup> Although politically weakened, the Caliph in Baghdad remained a religious symbol among Muslims with the sole authority to award titles to those vying for power. Maḥmūd engineered a calculated outward obedience to the Caliph who in turn awarded him with grandiose titles. This underlined his claims to legitimacy in ruling the empire of eastern Islam, more especially among the Turks who were impressed by the titles. Moreover, the *ghulam* (slave) origins of his family would have made such legitimacy politically useful to his ambitions.

Perhaps this may partially explain why al-Bīrūnī chose to present Maḥmūd in the manner that he did, namely because in so far as written materials are concerned, there appears a general attitude to glorify the military prowess of Muslims and to depict them as being in a holy war with the infidel. What is certain however of al-Bīrūnī's *Tahqīq*, is that it is far from political and targeted a more reasonable audience.

It is apparent from these accounts of Maḥmūd's interaction and governance of Hindus that Muslim-Hindu relations must be understood through the purview of the chroniclers who described the events and the motives that coloured their narratives. The narrative of conquest predominant in contemporary narratives are closely entwined in the political currents that permeated those events and conveniently couch their terms in religious rhetoric as if to give the impression that the expansion of *Dār al-Islām*, the establishment of Islamic rule, and the destruction of idols and idol worship were the only objectives for their exploits in India. The greater canvas of civil

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<sup>24</sup> Nāzim, *The Life and Times*. 164

interactions of a mutually beneficial nature is often overlooked and seldom packaged in convenient interpretations of a single historian or chronicler. By acknowledging that Maḥmūd did not singularly act in the name of religion and was influenced by political expediency and the practical needs of growing an empire, al-Bīrūnī's alignment of the deeper beliefs of Brahman Hinduism with the theological monotheism and ethical erudition of Islam should not be overshadowed by the prominent one-dimensional historical narrative that Maḥmūd was an iconoclastic and bigoted Muslim who represented a barbaric and aggressive religion.

Al-Bīrūnī's comparatively different approach to Hindus and Hinduism and his proposal that they share similar views to tawhīd was the voice of reason and religious conscience. Unlike his predecessors and many of his contemporaries, al-Bīrūnī's *Tahqīq* was neither political or partisan.

It is interesting to note that historians who have attempted to reconstruct early Muslim rule in India have predominantly focused on the narrative of conquest and relations reflecting mutual benefit between Muslims and Hindus, including the early Arab presence in North West India have been largely ignored. Curiously, the Arabs received little attention. Perhaps this is because this event was transitory and did not amount to a political presence. The seemingly cordial relations struck by the Muslim Arab settlers and Hindu society does provide an example of how non-politicized relations can represent the more accepting nature of Islamic beliefs and Muslim sensibilities.

In order to repress heresies of all types, some Sunni Muslim rulers believed that they had to demonstrate their willingness and ability to destroy the symbols of heretics and non-believers, and to repeat their accounts, however exaggerated, of destroying these symbols, in order to continually legitimize their rule. The specifics of what was destroyed become unimportant, since the claim is to destruction. Through these narratives, Somanāth comes to be imbued with symbolic significance for Sunni Islam: a significance that is affirmed in an inverse form, as it were, in later times in colonial and communal histories.

The repeated claim to destroying the temple reads like an exaggerated attempt on the part of the chroniclers to proclaim the greatness of their patrons and to prop up their self-importance. It would seem that after the first raid, the claim ceases to be history and becomes rhetoric. By now, the destruction of the temple had in itself become part of the rhetoric of conquest, and it did not matter too much whether it was actually raided every half-century. Yet, it continues to function as a temple. The elevation in importance of the Somanāth temple in Turko-Persian accounts subsequent to Maḥmūd's raid was a way of giving added importance to the raid. Was Somanāth being elevated as the Hindu equivalent of Mecca or of Baghdad and Maḥmūd's raid symbolic of the conquest of India?<sup>25</sup>

Maḥmūd's attack on Hindu temples and on Shī'a and Ismā'īlī mosques was, at one level, an attack against both the infidel and the heretic. The community of the victors was not a hegemonic or monolithic one but was segmented by the broader religious/political identity which consisted of Muslims of various sectarian persuasions and Hindus who were gradually integrating with and shaping the new political identity.

The narratives from the eleventh to the fourteenth centuries shift in their assessment of Maḥmūd. From eulogizing iconoclasm as well as the bashing of infidels and heretics and fantasizing about the wealth of India, they begin to have a greater concern with projecting the ideal Muslim ruler. This concern became problematic when rulership involved governing a largely non-Islamic society and where even large Muslim communities were not followers of orthodox Islam.

It appears that for many chroniclers, the coming of Islam in India was depicted as the success of the warrior, however for the most part the authors of the narratives were poets and court chroniclers. Fantasy would be almost a requirement in the case of the former. The latter would write to please and legitimize the reigning Sultan, often within the context of a distinct perspective. There would have been attempts to revise versions of earlier histories and write narratives reflecting contemporary demands. Even in their courtly

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<sup>25</sup> Richard. H. Davis. *The Lives of Indian Images*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 94



segregation from the rest of the society, there were aware that the religion of their patron was not necessarily that of the larger population. In the court circles of the Sultan's, the identities of Sunnis and Shi'as would have been important but perhaps not so outside those circles. The narratives of Maḥmūd were therefore bound to carry variations, depending on how the role of Islam among the elite was being perceived.

By way of example, several anecdotes in the *Siyāsat-nāma* of Niẓām al-Mulk portray Maḥmūd as the ideal Muslim hero and champion of Sunni Islam. This conception of the sultan is in line with the policies of the great vizier who was concerned with the establishment of Sunni Islam as both a political authority and religious interpretation against the radical views of Shi'ism in general, and Ismā'īlism in particular, that posed a constant threat to Sunni Islam politically and religiously. Niẓām al-Mulk wished to model the Seljuq Empire after forceful monarchs like Maḥmūd of Ghaznah.<sup>26</sup>

It is not surprising that al-Bīrūnī cast Maḥmūd in the light of his military prowess as the sultan had achieved great contemporary repute in the Islamic world particularly for his *jihād* campaigns in India. The Muslim world had seen little expansion of late and the inroads into Hind achieved by Maḥmūd came with wondrous imaginations of rich spoils of a mythical land. Furthermore, Maḥmūd's glory in the eyes of Muslims became assured as a counterbalance to the losses Muslims incurred in the west. The northern regions of *Shām* were under increasing pressures from Macedonian Byzantine emperors who captured Cyprus, Crete and a considerable portion of northern Syria. Jerusalem itself came under considerable pressure from the Byzantines who neared its borders. The threatening presence of the Byzantines and the losses incurred by their advances inflicted a general sense of sorrow and weakness among Muslims and struck a formidable blow to Muslim confidence. To offset the losses in Syria, news of the spectacular victories in the Indian subcontinent by Maḥmūd and father Sebuktigin spread far and

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<sup>26</sup> Bosworth. *Maḥmūd of Ghazna in Contemporary Eyes and in Later Persian Literature*. 89

wide and it is not unlikely that the narrative of conquest was further supported and promoted through fancy story telling.<sup>27</sup>

It is difficult to avoid the feeling that authorship on the Islamic presence in Hind was strictly structured to the established norms of conquest literature that sought to inspire the religious fervour of frontier communities and coax the Caliph for greater endorsements. The majority of readily available literature on early Muslim interaction with Hind and Hindus appears to be very one-dimensional. Muslims are portrayed as champions of the faith and the conquered Hindus the infidel. It all feels rather artificial. In such an environment, it is easy to overlook the fact that the conquest of Hind was actually a bargain, not between two clearly defined and opposing parties i.e. Muslims and Hindus, but a negotiation of common interest. This is not to say that Maḥmūd was not victorious on the battle field, rather that considerations associated with the desire for political stability and sustainable forms of revenue would have certainly occupied a large part of Maḥmūd's overall thought process regarding his campaigns in Hind. Moreover, the earlier model of Muslim conquest which was also projected through the vocabulary of Islamic *Jihād* and conquest by Muḥammad al-Qasim was in truth, more accommodating toward Hindu sensitivities. This is known through al-Hajjāj's orders to Muhammad al-Qasim, "Give them money, rewards, promotions...give them immunity (*amān*)...try to grant every request made by the princes and please them by giving bonds for the fulfilment of mutual promises."<sup>28</sup>

A review of the historiographical tradition developed and maintained by the vast majority of historians of medieval India reveals that students of medieval Indo-Muslim rule have focused their reconstructions of the past on predominantly one class of source material namely the 'readymade' historical narratives of official court chroniclers employed by the Sultan. These politically oriented narratives, often the only credible window into that era, have led historians to aim their writings toward political narratives rather than social movements as the more instructive form of understanding

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid. 87

<sup>28</sup> Wink. *Al-Hind the Making of the Indo-Islamic World*. Vol.1, 200

medieval India.<sup>29</sup> This single trajectory of historical undertaking has, in its abundance, overshadowed the comparatively limited attempts to portray Indian medieval history in a more holistic manner that examines, beneath the surface of court intrigue and political turmoil, the social forces instrumental in the understanding of that turmoil. Perhaps more poignantly, the nature and course of religious and social activity between Muslims and Hindus has, as a result, been ignored or overlooked.

Furthermore, a matter that adds to this disturbing realisation is the apparent divorce of Islam's role in the shaping of medieval India from the broader study of Islam as a religion and a system of belief, thought and practice in its wider, more global setting.<sup>30</sup> Thus, such questions as whether Sultan Maḥmūd's political and administrative policies reflected Islamic teachings or the actual currents of religious thought and feeling in the Muslim community during his rule have been disassociated from the alternative non-political representations of the Muslim consciousness towards Hind and Hindus. Little to no attempt has been made to build on non-politicised windows into Islam in medieval India such as al-Bīrūnī's *Tahqīq* and Gardīzi's *Zain al-Akḥbār* as representations of an Islamic consciousness and its role in the formation of Indian Islam. Historians have chosen instead to focus on the military exploits of Sultan Maḥmūd in what appears to be an attempt to suggest that such a factor is the sole determinant in the trajectory of future Muslim-Hindu relations, and the single blueprint for subsequent Muslim rule in India. Islam is presented by both contemporary chroniclers and later historians as a political order more so than a religious order.<sup>31</sup>

In view of the form of literature available regarding the classical sources of medieval India, it is readily understandable why a political theme has been emphasized over others. The historical evidences written by classical Muslims are clearly bent toward the

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<sup>29</sup> See for example Doctors Lane-Poole, Vincent Smith, Sir Wolseley Haig, Sir Jadunath Sarkar, Ibn Hasan, Sir Henry Elliot, Professor Dowson, and Montstuart Elphinstone among others.

<sup>30</sup> P. Hardy. *Indo-Muslim Historical Writing*. 3

<sup>31</sup> Consider for example al-Utbi, al-Bayhaqī, Farrukhī Sīstānī among contemporaries, al-Barānī a few centuries later and Montstuart Elphinstone, Sir Henry Elliot, and Professor Dowson among later historians.

political. They focus on a single Muslim authority namely the Sultan as the representative of Islam and are characterised by the narrative of conquest. In the case of the early Muslim presence in Hind, it is clear that officially appointed chroniclers composed their political histories in the attempt to legitimise the Sultan's rule in the eyes of Muslims for which they evoke the religious sentiments of the greater Muslim public by way of the Sultan championing the establishment of Islam and abolishing idol worship. Although there are clear and concrete examples of such activities, it is doubtful that they emanated from purely religious sentiments. Political stability and economic gain were important practical considerations that permeated all decisions and as such the invocation of religious sentiments can partially be seen as rhetoric.

### **The Economic Devastation of the Hindus Revisited**

This section argues that al-Bīrūnī's claim that the economic prosperity of the Hindus was utterly devastated by Maḥmūd must be qualified. Given the numerous following evidences of Hindu economic prosperity, al-Bīrūnī's description did not reflect the economic state of affairs during his time, but rather, was in reference to the destruction of the Somanāth temple; a region which saw significant maritime trade, as evidenced by the amount of booty collected by Maḥmūd.<sup>32</sup>

In regards to West India, which is the main scene of the drama that was to unfold between Muslims and Hindus, some familiarity with the historical background of this region leading up to the period under discussion may be useful as a preliminary. Since Gujarat was the hinterland to ports and trading centres from the time of the Indus civilization, its history is inevitably chequered. It has hosted diverse peoples and cultures apart from those already settled there and wove them into a society specific to the region.<sup>33</sup>

Subsequent to the campaigns in Sind led by Muḥammad bin Qāṣim in the eighth century A.D., Muslim migrants steadily settled down to trade rather than conquest. The descendants of those Arab

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<sup>32</sup> Nāzim, *Life and Times*. p. 118

<sup>33</sup> H.M. Elliot and J. Dowson. *The History of India as Told by its Own Historians*. (New Delhi: Low Price Publications, 1990), Vol. 2, 201

traders who had settled on the western coast, coming probably from southern Arabia, were seen as the *biyasara*, many of whom married locally and observed various local customs.<sup>34</sup> They had links with trading centres in West Asia such as Siraf, Oman, Basra and Baghdad and increasingly from Yemen.

The western seaboard was a bustling, thriving area, with intense trading activities and therefore became the habitat of settlements of a large range of people. The four core areas were the Indus delta, Saurashtra and the coast of Gujarat, Konkan, and Malabar. The first of these declined largely owing to the frequent silting of the branches of the Indus River in the delta, making ports dysfunctional and requiring them to shift location. The other three areas not only had long distance maritime trade but also traded among themselves and had extensive hinterlands.<sup>35</sup>

Saurashtra had a scatter of chieftains and minor rulers who were heads of clans and governed small principalities. The major royal patrons in Gujarat, from the tenth century to the thirteenth century, were the Chaulukyas, also known as the Solankis, who ruled from their base at Anahilavada.<sup>36</sup>

The period from AD 1000 to 1300 saw an upward sewing of the economy of Gujarat, partly due to the trade with West Asia but perhaps more because of the interest that the Chaulukyas took in encouraging this development.<sup>37</sup> The capital, Anahilavada, was a political centre with extensive commercial links. This is the period of the immediate aftermath of Maḥmūd's raid on Somanāth and clearly, despite what al-Bīrūnī says about the raids of Maḥmūd devastating the local economy,<sup>38</sup> this did not happen in Saurashtra and Gujarat where there were continuing and spectacular profits from trade.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> V.K. Jain. *Trade and Traders in Western India*. (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers Pvt. Ltd., 1990), 72, Wink. *Al-Hind the Making of the Indo-Islamic World*. Vol. 1. 68

<sup>35</sup> M. Husain. *The Rehla of Ibn Battuta*. (Baroda, 1953) 184-185 as found in Jain. *Trade and Traders*, 79

<sup>36</sup> A. K. Forbes. *The Ras Mala: Hindu Annals of Western India*. (New Delhi, 1973), 39

<sup>37</sup> Jain. *Trade and Traders*. 250-53

<sup>38</sup> See Sachau, *India*. Vol.1, 22; al-Bīrūnī, *Tahqīq*. 19-20

<sup>39</sup> Jain. *Trade and Traders*. 14, 48, 77, 80.

Perhaps the devastation was immediately after the raid and for a brief period. Perhaps the economic recovery may have been effective subsequent to al-Bīrūnī's departure from that region.

Agriculture was improved through systems of irrigation, as the hinterland of Saurashtra was prone to drought. Road links between rural areas and markets were established which also helped in better administration. The transportation of agricultural produce was made much easier. Cotton and indigo were taken to centres for the production of textiles, a substantial item of export. Financiers and the more wealthy merchants were sometimes large-scale landowners. These may have been the kinds of merchants who might buy the cargo of an entire ship in a single deal.<sup>40</sup> Organizations of artisans and merchants often formed guilds that were important organizationally both for the production of goods and for their distribution and sale. These covered the entire range of production and sale, from potters and betel-sellers to horse dealers and ship owners.

Brigandage and piracy, virtually normal to the area, was gradually controlled.<sup>41</sup> Attacks by local chiefs such as the Abhiras on rich commercial towns were frequent and the Chaulukyias were constantly running into problems with these rajas on this count.<sup>42</sup> Pilgrims to Somanāth had to pay a tax and this together with other valuables carried by them for making donations was looted by local rajas. Customs duties could be exorbitant and should have sufficed as a tax income from commerce. But presumably the rajas were used to obtaining coerced presentations as gifts. Piracy remained a lucrative source of income even into British times. Moreover, sea piracy is an indicator of successful maritime trade. Al-Bīrūnī refers to pirates in the region of Kacch and Somanāth as *Bawārij*.<sup>43</sup>

The success of maritime trade is also marked by the presence of extraordinary wealthy ship-owning merchants, the *nakhudas* as they were known to Arab sources, and the *nauvittakas* as referred to in Sanskrit texts and inscriptions. They were Persian, Arab, Jewish.

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid. 219

<sup>41</sup> Elliot and Dowson. *The History of India*, Vol. 1, 118

<sup>42</sup> Jain. *Trade and Traders*. 48

<sup>43</sup> Sachau, Vol. 1, 208.

and Indian and were from different places such as Hormuz, Siraf, Aden, and Mangalore. They commanded the seas and the coasts and saw the pirates as inveterate enemies.<sup>44</sup>

From all accounts, Somanāth was a significant centre for both inland and maritime trade. Its port, Veraval, adjoined the city and was one of the major ports of the region. The period from the ninth to the fifteenth century was one in which western India had a conspicuously wealthy trade with ports along the Arabian peninsula and with places such as Hormuz, Qays, and Siraf in the Persian Gulf. According to visiting traders, the Gujarat region was rich in resources and its merchants traded widely.<sup>45</sup> Undoubtedly, the most lucrative trade was in horses; each horse being purchased by Indian traders for 220 dinars of red gold.<sup>46</sup> According to the same source, as many as 10,000 horses were sent annually from ports and trading centres on and around the Gulf to Cambay and other ports in the vicinity, as well as further south along the west coast to Malabar in order to reach trading centres in the peninsula. Horses were in demand in order to maintain the army's cavalry wing and for ceremonial occasions. Horses of quality were not bred in India and were imported either from Central Asia via the north-western passes or by sea from the Persian Gulf. The constant demand for horses kept the trade alive. The antecedents of this trade go back many centuries and, irrespective of changing political control in this area, the trade in essential commodities was never seriously discontinued. Concern with extending and safeguarding this trade may well have been one of Maḥmūd's primary reasons for the attempting to control the western coast. The economic justification for meriting al-Bīrūnī's discourse on Islamic universalism must be questioned. Although to conquer a region in any form will certainly bring about a measure of economic instability, clearly the Ghaznavid mechanisms for economic justice were not overtly in favour of the Muslims otherwise

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<sup>44</sup> R. Chakaravarti. 'Nakhudas and Nauvittakas: Ship-Ownning Merchants in Coastal Western India.' *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*. (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 2000), 36-64

<sup>45</sup> Elliot and Dowson. *The History of India*. Vol. 1, 5, Vol. 3, 31-32

<sup>46</sup> Elliot and Dowson. *The History of India*. Vol. 3, 33

local merchants would not have prospered in the number and manner they so clearly did.<sup>47</sup>

In light of the extensive evidences of the rich trade in the region of Somanāth, it is understandable why al-Bīrūnī would make the claim that Maḥmūd utterly destroyed Hindu prosperity after sacking the temple and subjecting the region to his suzerainty.

### **Social Interaction through Trade**

So important was the trade that it introduced flexibility in relations between different religious groups. Thus, despite the political confrontation between the local rulers and the Ghaznavids, it did not prevent them from striking a working relationship. Moreover, it would appear by all sober accounts that such actions were not regarded as exceptional. Even if one argues that the motivation was to enhance commercial profit, nevertheless, the spirit of accommodating the religious institutions of others was impressive. An interesting contravention of the norms of caste functions was that the Brahmans were active in this commerce in northern India and particularly in the trade in horses with its substantial profits.<sup>48</sup> Al-Bīrūnī, writing in the eleventh century, states that Somanāth-Veraval was the port for people going to Zanj in east Africa and China.<sup>49</sup> Marco Polo comments in the thirteenth century that the people of Somanāth live by trade. He also mentions the trade in horses from Hormuz as being very valuable.<sup>50</sup>

The counterparts to the Arab traders were Indian merchants in the commercial centres in Gujarat and Veraval, and those who settled in Hormuz, or for that matter, even in Ghaznah after the eleventh century, who are invariably described as being extremely prosperous.

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<sup>47</sup> An example of this is the Hindu merchant, Aṇahilavāda also called Wasa Abhira in Ghazni. Jain. *Trade and Traders*. 49

<sup>48</sup> Abū Raihān Al-Bīrūnī, *Al-Bīrūnī's India An Account of the Religion, Philosophy, Literature, Geography, Chronology, Astronomy, Customs, Laws and Astrology of India about A.D. 1030*, translated from Arabic by Edward C. Sachau (London: Routledge Trübner's Oriental Series, 2000) Vol. 2, 149; Jain. *Trade and Traders*. 179-180

<sup>49</sup> Sachau. India. Vol. 2, 104

<sup>50</sup> W. Marsden. *The Travels of Marco Polo*. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company Inc., 1953), 46-50, 61



Wealthy merchants such as Jagadu, or Wasa Abhira from Anahilapattana, had their agents, often Indian, in Hormuz and Ghaznah, respectively, through whom they conducted trade. The trade focused on imports from West Asia that included horses, wine and metals and with exports from India consisting especially of a range of textiles, spices, semi-precious stones, timber and swords.<sup>51</sup> The existence of Hindu merchant communities settling within Muslim cities is another point that questions the sense of complete separation between Muslims and Hindus offered by al-Bīrūnī's narrative.

The commercial centres of Gujarat had access to the hinterlands of northern India as well as their coastal trade. Commercial wealth steadily increased from the tenth century and the noticeable prosperity of Gujarat was due both to inland trade as well as trade with Arabs and Persians, particularly at centres in Saurashtra and Cambay. These were points of exchange in the far larger trade across the Indian Ocean, which together with the overland trade through Central Asia was creating an economy that may be called virtually global.<sup>52</sup>

In the eighth century, under the command of Muḥammad bin Qāsim and during the caliphate of Hārūn al-Rashīd the Arabs raided Sind. India's invasion by foreigners largely unknown to the Hindus led to the migration of Hindu religious learning and religious images and symbols to India's fortified hinterlands where they would be safe from foreign desecration.<sup>53</sup> Subsequent to this campaign, the Arabs gradually settled down to trade rather than conquest. The descendants of those Arab traders who had settled on the western coast were seen as the *biyasara*, many of whom married locally and observed various local customs.<sup>54</sup> They had links with trading centres in West Asia such as Siraf, Oman, Basra, Baghdad, and Yemen and as a result

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<sup>51</sup> Jain. *Trade and Traders*. 65, 66, 81

<sup>52</sup> See Abu-Lughod, Janet L. *Before European hegemony: the world system A.D. 1250-1350*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989)

<sup>53</sup> Sachau, Vol. 1, 22. and Al-Bīrūnī, *Tahqīq*, 12

<sup>54</sup> Jain. *Trade and Traders*. 72. Wink. *Al-Hind the Making of the Indo-Islamic World*. Vol. 1, 68

maritime commerce flourished particularly at the hands of the newly settled Arabs.

Though the Indian kings resisted Arab/Muslim attacks, they nonetheless welcomed Arab/Muslim merchants and accorded them significant treatment. Some even showed an interest in better understanding Islam and engaged Muslim visitors in dialogue and debate. Al-Mas'ūdī explains how he visited the town of Cambay, which was ruled by a Brahman called Banīyā<sup>55</sup> who was appointed by al-Balharā of Malkhedh. Al-Mas'ūdī describes him as having, "...a keen interest in debating with Muslim visitors and those of other creeds who came to his country."<sup>56</sup> Al-Mas'ūdī further remarks that, "Islam in his country is protected and respected; there are mosques, large and small, where the daily prayers are performed."<sup>57</sup>

The individual and often warring kingdoms of India however, do not allow for generalisations to be drawn. Although there were kingdoms that welcomed Muslims, there were others that did not. The king of Kanauj for example was hostile to Muslims particularly the Muslims of Multan.<sup>58</sup>

The kindness showed by Hindu kings towards Muslims informs us that although the Arabs no longer enjoyed political authority, they continued to remain in Hind as traders and enjoyed relatively complete religious freedoms. In spite of the political animosity between Hindus and Muslims as reflected in the campaigns of Sultan Maḥmūd, the policy and attitude of the local kings towards Arab-Muslim traders was one of peace and toleration. Why the Hindus would allow Arab settlers to dominate the maritime trade is on consideration a particularly curious matter given that by doing so the Arabs took a large chunk from the economic prosperity of the Hindus. The answer to this question is found in the commercial benefits of allowing the Arabs to engage in international trade as it led to a significant influx in trade and increased prosperity. Ibn

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<sup>55</sup> Ahmad M. H. Shboul. *Al-Mas'udi & his world: a Muslim Humanist and His Interest in Non-Muslims*. (London: Ithaca Press, 1979), 159 Elliot and Dowson. *The History of India*. Vol. 1, 27, 34

<sup>56</sup> Shboul. *Al-Mas'udi and His World*. 6-7

<sup>57</sup> Shboul. *Al-Mas'udi and His World*. 159

<sup>58</sup> Shboul. *Al-Mas'udi and His World*. 158

Batutta notes that Hindu kings wished to profit from the international trade connections of the Arab settlers.<sup>59</sup>

Gujarat in the period from AD 1000 to 1400 witnessed, what might be called, a ‘renaissance’ culture of the Jaina mercantile community. Rich merchant families were in political office, controlled state finances, were patrons of culture, scholars, and liberal donors to Jaina temples. Amazingly, these activities were maintained throughout a period which, as assessed from Muslim sources, was one of considerable disturbance—if these sources are to be taken literally—and the disturbance largely originated with the expeditions of Maḥmūd.

Apart from the stability of the Jaina merchants, the commercial wealth of Gujarat was tied to traders who had connections with the seaports and commerce to the west. They were not all visitors since there were small communities of Arab traders settled in Gujarat.<sup>60</sup> Many of these were Ismā‘īlī Muslims and had their own mosques, distinct from those of Sunni Muslims, but in many other ways they conformed to local usage. The Ismā‘īlīs resisted the Sunni Turks and, to that extent, seem not to have been seen as a threat by local rulers. The two communities that gradually became dominant were the Khojas and the Bohras, both claiming roots in West Asia. There were some borrowing of non-Sunni ideas, and some from the religions of Gujarat. The Khojas were close to the beliefs and practices of the Ismā‘īlīs and Shī‘as while the Bohras had Vaishnava elements in their beliefs, supporting the theory of incarnations and observing Hindu inheritance laws.<sup>61</sup>

The intermixing of ideologies and social practices is evident. Acceptance of some local beliefs and practices makes it easier for traders to be accommodated in the local trading diaspora. These Arab merchant communities that evolved at the time were different from those influenced by the Turks, with their emphasis on conquest and

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<sup>59</sup> Jain. *Trade and Traders*. 79.

<sup>60</sup> S.C. Misra. *The Muslim Communities in Gujarat*. (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1985), 10

<sup>61</sup> M. N. Pearson. *Merchants and Rulers in Gujarat: the Response to the Portuguese in the Sixteenth Century*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), 27

dominance. The Arab interests shifted from dominance through conquest in the initial phase to participation in the local economy in the later phase. For the Turks at this time, dominance was through conquest and through governance, as seen by the example of Maḥmūd. The rising prosperity of Jaina merchants was dependant on the trade with the hinterland and with the Gulf. This meant that Indian merchants had bases in the entrepots of the Gulf and merchants from there visited India. The Indians visiting the Gulf have left us no accounts of the narratives of what they saw and did. Fortunately, the Arab visitors and traders did write about the Indian scene.<sup>62</sup>

It appears that establishing international trade and the promise of substantial profits was sufficient motive to put aside religious and cultural differences. Hindu traders were ready to see trade grow and there are cases where Hindu traders established flourishing trade with Ghaznah.<sup>63</sup> It is through the consideration of such facts that causes the image of a predatory Ghaznavid empire dedicated to the complete subjugation of Hind and Hindus to come into question. More poignantly, in the context of al-Bīrūnī, the complete foreignness of Muslims to Hindus must be qualified. One should not mistake al-Bīrūnī's narrative to mean that there was absolutely no contact between Muslims and Hindus, despite this being easily understood from his narrative in view of how al-Bīrūnī paints a picture of Hindu alienation of Muslims and for that matter all foreigners.<sup>64</sup> Al-Bīrūnī's narrative offers an extreme picture of the social relations between Muslims and Hindus through his assertion that the Hindus went so far as to frighten their children by the mention of Muslims and that they would refuse to touch anything that a Muslim has touched, or associate with anyone with whom a Muslim has associated. Clearly, such blanket sentiments did not apply to all Hindus and were not borne out of economic factors. There are clearly many important forms of interaction outside of the narrative of conquest that equally help form a more dynamic and complex

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<sup>62</sup> Jain. *Trade and Traders*, 72-77

<sup>63</sup> Elliot and Dowson. *The History of India*. Vol. 2, 200-201, Jain. *Trade and Traders*. 81

<sup>64</sup> Sachau, Vol. 1, 21. and Al-Bīrūnī, *Tahqīq*, 11

relationship between Muslims and Hindus. The kindness shown to Muslim settlers is an expression of how issues of mutual benefit help create culturally and religiously diverse trading centres. Hindu kindness must have been reciprocated by Muslims because if it was not, it is hard to imagine the continued political patronage shown by Hindu rulers towards Muslim traders.<sup>65</sup> India was not as insular as al-Bīrūnī would suppose. The Indo-Iranian borderlands and north-western India had witnessed the continuous movement of peoples going back and forth since early times. Among such movements was the conquest of the tukharas/Turks by Lalitaditya of Kashmir in the eighth century A.D. Turkish mercenaries were employed by the later kings of Kashmir as they were skilled cavalymen with battle-seasoned horses.<sup>66</sup> Kashmir established close links with the Kingdom of Gandhara and to some extent Tokharistan. This area became a pool for the recruitment of mercenaries for any army that required soldiers with little concern for their religious affiliations.

One is therefore left wondering why al-Bīrūnī's narrative failed to mention such important platforms of interaction and coexistence. It is difficult to imagine that a learned and curious

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<sup>65</sup> An important issue here is the legal status of Hindus. Classical Islamic sources remain silent on the issue. Islamic literature when addressing the legal status of non-Muslims under the Muslim state mainly addressed Jews and Christians as *ahl al-Kitāb* (people of the book) who are awarded special status as associated faiths (stemming in origin from a single divine source) and who are thus under the protection of the Islamic state. This meant that Muslim jurists were required to search for a decision regarding the legal status of Hindus under the Muslim state from authorities not directly related to the legal texts of the Qur'ān and the Sunnah. It was during the first conquest of the western coast of Hind by Muḥammad al-Qāsim in the eighth century that we find Muslim scholars associating Hindus with the vague religion of the Sabians; a religion recognised in Islam as being among the people of the book. This interpretation was first applied to the Zoroastrians in Persia and was now applied to the Hindus in Hind. This ruling never saw consensus among Muslim scholars and was a matter of heated debate among Muslims as some perceived the ruling as a form of compromise with idol worship for presumably what could have been for political and economic reasons. See Wink. *Al-Hind the Making of the Indo-Islamic World*. Vol. 1, 195.

<sup>66</sup> Kalhana. (12<sup>th</sup> Century). *Rajatarangini the saga of the kings of Kashmir*. (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1990), 4.v.166 (p. 133), 4.v.179 (p. 134)

scholar such as al-Bīrūnī was ignorant of such matters. By indulging in a measure of speculation, one may wonder if al-Bīrūnī failed to mention such platforms of exchange because he thought them superficial as on the creedal level, within the Hindu belief system foreigners have no meaningful status and as such a platform for meaningful appreciation of each other was still very much in need despite the existence of what was seen to be a manageable working relationship. One may also speculate if al-Bīrūnī intended his narrative for such environments, i.e. the settled Muslim merchant coastal communities, or if he wished to address the learned community of Muslim scholars. It would seem that the second possibility is more likely for several reasons. Firstly, much of the *Tahqīq* consists of specialised scientific discourse, which was clearly meant for a learned readership. Secondly, al-Bīrūnī's criticism of Muslim approaches to the study of other religions by Muslim scholars was a methodological criticism aimed at rectifying the analytical framework and mind set of Muslim scholarship of other religions and civilizations. Thirdly, what some have considered to be the disparate nature of the *Tahqīq* and al-Bīrūnī's scholarship on the whole, would make coherent sense when one assumes that al-Bīrūnī had a certain theory in mind when venturing to make sense of the many facets of a religious civilization, particularly one as old and nuanced as Hinduism. In this context, our proposed theory of Islamic universalism stands a good chance of begin such a theory and although it is broad in scope, one's theory must be as broad as civilization if they are to interpret a civilization.

### **Maḥmūd, Somanāth and Muslim-Hindu Relations**

Any notion of Islamic universalism rests on the premise that Islam can acknowledge and embrace any given human being regardless of their initial belief, ethnicity or culture. The history of Islam is replete with instances of such an embracing sense of universalism. One such example is the spread of Islam in India. Although any single event cannot be attributed as the sole cause of Islam's spread in India, the historical time frame of Sultan Maḥmūd's many conquests in India and the establishment of Ghaznavid authority in the region led to Islam being permanently established in North West India and

constitutes perhaps the earliest organised and sustained example of Muslim authority in India. Accordingly, the administrative policies, modes of governance and social acceptance and/or rejection of this recently established Ghaznavid Empire enjoyed the share of the predecessor in determining the trajectory of its relationship with India in its totality to effect the shape and form of future relations with the country as a strategic geographical partner, as a new religious identity, as a source of economic resources, as a culture and as a people. As such, the immense significance of early Ghaznavid rule in the Punjab region of India in determining future Muslim-Hindu relations can hardly be ignored if a credible exposition on an embrasive ideal such as Islamic universalism during the fourth and fifth century hijra is to be achieved.

There is little doubting the significance of the person of Maḥmūd in framing al-Bīrūnī's narrative. In his narrative, it is easy to mistake from al-Bīrūnī's description of Maḥmūd that he was a warmonger who lacked the proper methods of Islamic governance. This is chiefly seen in al-Bīrūnī's recollection of the events surrounding the conquest of Somanāth.

There are contending theses regarding the overall impact of Mahmūd's governance in India. Al-Bīrūnī says of Mahmūd's exploits in India, that he "utterly destroyed the prosperity of the Hindu's."<sup>67</sup> This statement does not afford much in terms of details and remains silent on the context in which Mahmūd 'destroyed' Hindu prosperity. Nāzīm's sober study of the life and rule of Mahmūd describes his reign to be principally a time of conquest and in such a context infringing on the finer sensibilities of the conquered and inspiring some degree of contempt can hardly be avoided. Maḥmūd wielded the sword of Islam so successfully that the "Hindu's were like dust under his feet."<sup>68</sup> With this in mind, Nāzīm was critical of the contending thesis expressed by Mohammad Habib<sup>69</sup> that due to Maḥmūd's exploits in India; "a burning hatred" for Islam was created in the Hindu mind because Islam was presented "in the guise of

<sup>67</sup> Sachau, *India*. Vol.1, 22; al-Bīrūnī, *Tahqīq*. 19-20

<sup>68</sup> Sachau, *India*. Vol.1, 22; al-Bīrūnī, *Tahqīq*. 19-20

<sup>69</sup> Mohammad Habib, *Sultan Mahmud of Ghaznin*. (S. Chand and Co: New Delhi, 1967)

plundering armies.”<sup>70</sup> Nāzīm regarded this argument to be less than convincing. He cites as an alternative cause to the soured relations between Muslims and Hindus, al-Bīrūnī’s explanation that the Hindu rejection of Islam and Muslims was a natural consequence of the irreconcilable differences between Islam and Hinduism.<sup>71</sup> This claim appears to the researcher to have overlooked al-Bīrūnī’s exposition on the Brahman—styled Hindu belief system, which consists of several comparisons between Islam, Greek philosophy, Christianity, and Hinduism. Interestingly enough, al-Bīrūnī’s limited references to Maḥmūd in his *Kitāb al-Hind* collectively depict him as a successful Muslim warrior who trampled all Hindu resistance with the utmost ease. Furthermore, there can be little ignoring the value and credibility of al-Bīrūnī’s narrative as he experienced first-hand, events as they unfolded and his somewhat favourable status among Hindus allowed him insights into their reception and perception of these events. We know from al-Bīrūnī that one result of Maḥmūd’s expeditions was the migration of Hindu religious knowledge into the impregnable strongholds of Kashmir and Benares.<sup>72</sup> With this in mind, Habib’s emphasis on Maḥmūd’s military exploits as a cause for tension between Muslims and Hindus appears to have a good deal of credibility and should not be easily dismissed.

However, the question is not whether or not Maḥmūd’s military success led to Hindu hatred of Islam and Muslims as this is only a natural consequence of conquest and victory, rather, but whether or not this was the only platform upon which Maḥmūd engaged the Indians and whether or not it constituted the deciding factor in defining Hindu perceptions of Islam and determining the course of future relations between the two religions and societies. Al-Bīrūnī’s account of Maḥmūd is very one dimensional, namely that he was a conqueror. Certainly, Maḥmūd’s relations with the Hindus were much more complex. This paper contends that this was a deliberate move on behalf of al-Bīrūnī to emphasise the lack of a religious underpinning to existing platforms of Muslim-Hindu

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<sup>70</sup> Nāzīm, *The Life and Times*. 162

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.* 162

<sup>72</sup> Sachau, Vol. 1, 22. and Al-Bīrūnī, *Tahqīq*, 12



engagement; one in which the value of a human beings and the essential religious foundations of Hindu civilization were ignored.

Perhaps the study of history will remain uncertain as regards the exact nature of Maḥmūd's treatment of the Hindus, what is certain however is that there are several conflicting narratives each with its own set of bias and structures of interpretation. Accordingly, identifying the background, objective, and approach of each narrative will lead to a mature and enlightened understanding from which a more reasonable conclusion can be drawn. The popular image that Maḥmūd was an uncompromising, uncompassionate protagonist of orthodox Muslim belief at the expense of the religious and human rights of the Hindus cannot and should not be accepted without proper inquiry as to the real affairs of his government.<sup>73</sup>

Perhaps the most controversial incident in Maḥmūd's varied repertoire of Hindu engagements that has attracted the attention of a good number of scholars and politicians is his raid of the temple of Somanāth and its subsequent destruction. This paper seeks to better understand official Muslim treatment of Hindus by employing Maḥmūd's management of this specific incident as a catalyst for the general treatment of Hindus by Muslims. The various interpretations awarded to this event that have effectively made it the epitome of Muslim-Hindu relations are investigated for their merit and for the biases peculiar to each interpretation. During the course of this line of inquiry, it will be seen that al-Bīrūnī's narrative was restricted by the methodology he had set upon himself and it is by such means that his *Tahqīq* can be considered a refreshingly objective account of the religion and culture of the period. This causes the *Tahqīq* to be seen as a work that does not target a political audience but one that is or should be interested in a learned exchange of ideas for more sophisticated and meaningful relations between Muslims and Hindus.

To position the raid in its historical context requires a consideration of the wider spectrum of Maḥmūd's ambitions in relation to his being the leader of a rapidly growing empire consisting of both urban and rural communities. These ambitions constitute an

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<sup>73</sup> See for example Doctors Lane-Poole, Vincent Smith, Sir Wolseley Haig, Sir Jadunath Sarkar, Ibn Hasan, Sir Henry Elliot, Professor Dowson, and Montstuart Elphinstone among others.

important light for understanding Maḥmūd's motives for his campaigns into India. On face value, Maḥmūd's activities in the Indian subcontinent on the one hand, and in Afghanistan and Central Asia on the other, appear to be dichotomous, but after considering the needs of a growing empire and an increasingly affluent, and hence demanding, courtly culture, connections between his management of Afghanistan and Central Asia and his expeditions into India are more readily discernable. To better understand the motives for Maḥmūd's expeditions, basic knowledge of what was transpiring on the other side of the boarder is needed. The purpose of the expeditions was multiple, among which fortifying his borders, establishing additional sources of state revenue, and establishing Islam in the region were undoubtedly central motivations. Maḥmūd was not singularly motivated by religion but other motivations, at least in terms of practical worth, were equally important. In origin, the Turks were pastoralists and raiding was an accepted means of obtaining wealth.<sup>74</sup> By no means is this historical footnote an attempt to exonerate them, it is merely an attempt to help explain certain psychological factors that may have contributed toward facilitating Maḥmūd's revenue seeking exploits in India and perhaps more pointedly suggest that his raids were a means of augmenting much needed wealth to feed his empire. Among the commonly associated spoils of his expeditions were the capture of animal herds, usurping urban treasures and capturing prisoners of war to be sold, put to work, or recruited into the army. A vast and active army like Maḥmūd's must have needed regular supplies to supplement the losses incurred when at war and to feed and maintain the troops and horses. Moreover, establishing supply lines to the more fertile lands of India as opposed to the more barren landscape of Central Asia would have constituted a significant strategic and perhaps necessary military feat. Judging by the rate and frequency of Maḥmūd's military campaigns both within and beyond his borders, his army was a disciplined body of fast-moving, horse-riding warriors, well

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<sup>74</sup> A.K.S. Lambton. *Continuity and Change in Medieval Persia, Aspects of Administrative, Economic and Social History, 11<sup>th</sup> to 14<sup>th</sup> Century*. (London: Sunny Press, 1988)

weathered by unrelenting climatic conditions, constant movement and regular battle.

Maḥmūd was not alone in this image of a menacing adventurer trying to establish for himself a kingdom, in India too there were similar self-styled adventurers trying to create a small principality for themselves. The origins of dynasties frequently refer to the feats of such daring figures who managed to conquer a region and establish themselves as rulers.<sup>75</sup> In light of this, similar to the constant political struggle and ensuing geographic flexibility of political domains within the Muslim world, the constant increment, decrement, and conquest of political boundaries within India would not have been any more alien. However, there is a quantitative difference between the raids of local adventurers and those of Maḥmūd.

Although Maḥmūd was raised in urban environments and socialised with the society's upper crust, he did however spend a considerable portion of his young and adult life in military environments which intimately acquainted him with the demands of the military and constituents for effective military machinery.<sup>76</sup> His authority in the empire he was expanding and consolidating which incorporated Afghanistan, northern Persia, and Khurasan in Central Asia, rested in his ability to inspire obedience or force submission over two symbiotic but variant societies. One was of the pastoralist communities on the frontiers and steppe lands, and the other, the vibrant commercial mercantile communities of oasis towns and trading centres of Persia and Afghanistan. Undoubtedly, the contrast between both types of communities would have presented Maḥmūd with different demands each with its own set of challenges.

As for the many temple towns that dotted the Indian landscape and that housed religious monks and aesthetes, they were unfamiliar to the Turks and would have been seen as easy targets for plunder. In his expedition to Somanāth, Maḥmūd would have passed by a good number of temple towns, but given their relative distance and

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<sup>75</sup> See for example the discussion of regional configurations in Upinder Singh. *A History of Ancient and Early Medieval India from the Stone Age to the 12<sup>th</sup> Century*. (Delhi: Pearson/Longman, 2009), 550-572

<sup>76</sup> Nāzim, *The Life and Times*. 34-38

isolation from commercial centres and significant urban areas, they would not have merited any significant mention by Muslim chroniclers. The temple towns and commercial centres of Thanesar, Multan, and Somanāth that dotted the coast of the Indian Ocean would have, and indeed did, attract the attention of Maḥmūd's army and captured the imagination of Muslim chroniclers as they presented much more formidable targets and were associated with sizeable economic benefits. The wealth from such expeditions was used to finance the army and to maintain the Ghaznavid state. This Indian expedition, like those before it, was largely seen as successful from a military, political, and economic point of view and there is no reason to suggest that it does not form part of what al-Bīrūnī meant when he referred to Hindus as being like 'scattered dust under his (Maḥmūd's) feet'. However, to say that this particular expedition led to the utter ruin of the economic prosperity of this particular region in India appears to pertain to the immediate aftermath of the expedition, as there are a number of sources that attest to the vibrant commercial activities of the coastal ports in the Punjab.<sup>77</sup> Perhaps al-Bīrūnī left immediately after the expedition and did not revisit the region and as such did not witness what appears to be a rapid rejuvenation of commercial trade. Moreover, to associate this region with al-Bīrūnī's description of Hindu perceptions of outsiders, particularly Muslims, as *mlechha*<sup>78</sup> appears to be incorrect as Muslim communities largely associated with trade, had established themselves in the region and regularly interacted with various Hindu classes including the Brahmans. This must have been more of a religious interpretation of events as clearly they were not economic. It appears that the relationship between Muslims and Hindus rested on their shared economic value and as such religious knowledge and symbols may have been outside the boundaries of this relationship that appears to have been forged on convenience. In light of this, al-Bīrūnī's description of complete Hindu rejection of Muslims and to a larger extent the outside world would have concerned the Hindu communities distantly located from commercial centres such as in the north east or towards Kashmir. An alternative explanation is that

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<sup>77</sup> As demonstrated earlier in the paper.

<sup>78</sup> Sachau, *India*. Vol.1, 19; al-Bīrūnī, *Tahqīq*. 17.

al-Bīrūnī chose to ignore the daily interactions between Muslims and Hindus and opted instead to understand and portray things from a more creedal point of view as earlier mentioned. Moreover, in regards to the rapid rejuvenation of coastal trade, it should be borne in mind that the coastal region was now under the suzerainty of Sultan Maḥmūd. It is highly unlikely that Maḥmūd lacked the foresight to recognise the financial potential of the trading ports and towns to sustain his empire and was content with a one-off payment from his conquest.

Greater insight into Muslim treatment of Hindus via the governance of Maḥmūd is afforded by an anecdote in which it is reported that after conquering Somanāth Sultan Maḥmūd held a council with the people of Somanāth for the appointment of a governor, which resulted in the recommendation and subsequent appointment of a member of the Dabishlim family.<sup>79</sup>

Another example of Muslim-Hindu relations is the subscription of Indian mercenaries, presumably Hindu, into the Ghaznavid army. Indian soldiers were referred to as Suverdhray and there is nothing to suggest that they were not loyal to Maḥmūd. They formed a not insubstantial part of his army and were assigned a Turkish commander referred to as *Sipahsalar-i-Hinduwan*. They were assigned their own quarter in Ghaznah and were allowed to continue practicing their own religion. There is one recorded instance whereby the Turkish commander of this contingency rebelled and the command was given to a Hindu named Tilak who was commended for his loyalty.<sup>80</sup> This act leads one to question the often single minded assertion of researchers that Maḥmūd was an unforgiving iconoclast with no tolerance of other beliefs, and by questioning this popular assumption, new meaning is possible regarding Muslim-Hindu relations. Establishing a Hindu presence in the capital

<sup>79</sup> Captain G. Roos-Keppel's translation of the *Tarikh-i-Sultan Mahmud-i-Ghaznavi* (The History of Sultan Mahmud of Ghazni). (Lahore: Anglo-Sanskrit Press, 1908), 45-47

<sup>80</sup> Clifford E. Bosworth. *The Ghaznavids their Empire in Afghanistan and Eastern Iran 994:1040*. (Beirut: Libraire Du Liban, 1973), 101. Muḥammad Nāzīm. *The Life and Times of Sultān Maḥmūd of Ghazna*. (New Delhi: Munishiram Mahoharlal, 1971), 162

of an empire at war with Hind starkly contrasts with the popular view depicting the Ghaznavids as being insensitive to the religious sentiments of Hindus. Maḥmūd's decision to allow Hindu mercenaries to practice their religious beliefs is evidence that he was willing to give concessions albeit for reasons other than religious and expresses a form of openness in governance that permits the expression of an individual's religious convictions within the Muslim polity.

An interesting event in Maḥmūd's relations with Hindus, which once again questions the popular image of Maḥmūd as an unforgiving iconoclast, is the administrative system he adopted for managing the sequestered Indian territories. Ghaznavid control largely continued in the existing administrative system. To this end, Ghaznavid coins issued in north-western India have bilingual legends written in Arabic and Sharda scripts. Islamic titles together with the portrayal of the Shaiva bull, Nandi were struck on the coins. A *dirham* struck at Lahore carries a legend in the Sharda script and a rendering in colloquial Sanskrit of the Islamic *Kalima* and reads: *avyaktam ekam muhammada avatara nripati mahamuda*, 'There is One Unmanifest [or invisible], Muhammad is the avatar, the king is Maḥmūd.'<sup>81</sup> Flood explains,

"The attempt to translate between the concept of avatar and messenger conforms to the absorption and co-option of autochthonous deities as a common part of the process of medieval Indic state formation. It also cuts also both ways, finding a counterpart in some of the earliest surviving Arabic and Persian works on Indian religions, which describe the belief of certain Brahmans in prophethood (*al-risāla*), and refer to Mahadeva and Vasudeva (avatars of Shiva and Vishnu respectively) as the "prophet of God"

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<sup>81</sup> Finbarr B. Flood, *Objects of Translation: Material Culture and Medieval "Hindu-Muslim" Encounter*. (New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 2009), 41. See also A.K. Bhattacharya. 'Bilingual Coins of Maḥmūd of Ghazni,' *Journal of the Numismatic Society of India*. (Bombay: The Numismatic Society of India, 1964), Vol. 28, 53-56

(*rasūl Allāh*), adopting the terminology of envoyship central to Islamic thought.”<sup>82</sup>

This was a considerable compromise with the orthodox sensibilities Maḥmūd is often heralded as having championed and can be explained as a means to assert his authority in the region by issuing new coinage that reflected Muslim rule while at the same time ensuring its public acceptance by including some familiar features from the old money in order to make it more easily acceptable as legal tender in the market. Such is evidence of the political foresight of Maḥmūd and what appears to be broad Muslim-Hindu relations that was tacitly ignored by al-Bīrūnī. Moreover, this once again questions al-Bīrūnī’s picture of Maḥmūd and how al-Bīrūnī rendered Maḥmūd’s obstinacy part of the frame for his narrative. Clearly, Maḥmūd was much more complex than al-Bīrūnī gives credit and although al-Bīrūnī’s exposition does not centre on Maḥmūd, he does nevertheless form an important factor for the justification of the *Tahqīq*. This can be interpreted as being due to the fact that such Hindu engagements by Maḥmūd did not reflect truly Islamic sentiments, and were more for economic advantage and political strategy. Clearly, this does not fit in well with al-Bīrūnī’s advocacy of an axiological platform for advancing Muslim-Hindu relations.<sup>83</sup> What is interesting, if Maḥmūd did in fact endorse this coinage, and there is no reason to reject this claim, then it constitutes a concrete measure towards co-existence, which is a major by-product of Islamic universalism. Why then would al-Bīrūnī choose to ignore, what seems to be an important development in Muslim-Hindu relations? Perhaps he thought this material culture was superficial and that real and lasting co-existence can only take place when a much more profound appreciation of each civilization is achieved, namely on the level of religion.

Another feature of Muslim-Hindu relations is that the social architecture of Muslim administered India saw Indian slave soldiers become prominent under Ghaznavid rule, some of whom were

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<sup>82</sup> Flood, *Objects of Translation*. 41-42

<sup>83</sup> As evident in his discussion of the values of al-Ṣidq and al-ʿAdālah in which al-Bīrūnī draws on examples from the Muslim, Christian, and Greek traditions. *Tahqīq*, 14, Sachau, Vol. 1, 4-5

awarded respectable posts within the Ghaznavid administration. Indian mamlūks served as an important counter weight to the ethnically Turkish Muslim leaders particularly in the administration of Indian territories. Judging by the common Ghaznavid policy of allowing the local administrations of conquered territories to maintain running their region, in addition to the mamlūk origins of the Turks themselves, it is not surprising that Indian natives resumed their administrative posts albeit under Turkish suzerainty to the effect that Indian natives maintained a degree of affluence throughout the various Muslim dynasties in India. Although it was not uncommon to find Indians traded as slaves, India never constituted a centre for slavery comparable to say the Turks or Africans. It was Indian trade that captured the attention of Muslim conquerors.

Augmenting new sources of wealth helped finance an increasingly affluent courtly culture and was used to extend patronage and attract notable Muslim scholars and litterateurs to the court at Ghaznah. Al-Bīrūnī can be considered among such persons and his forced migration to Ghaznah was also part of Maḥmūd's political policy to have all those who could possibly fuel rebellion in one form or another close at hand. As unfortunate as the terms of his detainment were, his migration to Ghaznah permitted al-Bīrūnī to undertake a sizeable study of the Hindus which left us with perhaps the most insightful observations on Indian society. Al-Bīrūnī's *Kitāb al-Hind* is a monument in Indian studies and a lasting reminder of the sense of mankind's universal fraternity and universal human knowledge and experience present in the minds of some learned Muslims.

One should note that for the Muslim Ghaznavids, conquering new territories was not aimed solely at non-Muslims, in this case the Hindus. As such, al-Bīrūnī's reference to Maḥmūd's economic devastation of Hindus, if it can be validly accepted, should not be misunderstood as targeting Hindus alone. Far from it, the potential for monetization by raiding temple villages can be seen as part of a greater process to fund the state and to generate funds for further investment in other projects. So grand were the stories associated with the wealth of India that the spoils of Maḥmūd's conquests have



been described by some as a ‘goldrush’.<sup>84</sup> The figures mentioned regarding the amount of bounty must be nominal as they are rather extravagant. Court chroniclers and historians, in their awe of the spoils and their general intrigue for the wealth of India, likely exaggerated the figures. The spoils from Somanāth are said to have amounted to 20 million dinars, and that from the raid of the Shi’a centre of Rayy in Persia in 1029 was only a little less. The figures mentioned for Rayy are 5,00,000 dinars worth of jewels, 30,000 dinars worth of gold and silver vessels and 2,60,000 dinars worth of coined money.<sup>85</sup> Maḥmūd, therefore, raided both Hindu and Muslim centres, the latter it they were not Sunni Muslims. If the figures for the wealth obtained are even halfway correct, they are enormous. Possibly, the figures have been exaggerated to glorify Maḥmūd since it is debatable whether these towns could have generated so much wealth and, even after its loss, continued to flourish. But even if a fraction of this wealth were obtained, it would be impressive. The rise of Ghaznah as the seat of the Ghaznavid Empire must have been rapid as only a few decades earlier, Maḥmūd’s father, Sebuktagain carved out a relatively marginal commercial centre in the transit trade between Khurasan and Transoxiana with Ghaznah as the seat of his power.<sup>86</sup> Understanding the importance of augmenting sources of wealth is an important prelude to understanding the way in which the Somanāth expedition should be understood.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>84</sup>Wink. *Al-Hind the Making of the Indo-Islamic World*. Vol.1, 23

<sup>85</sup> Bosworth. *The Ghaznavids*. 78

<sup>86</sup> Ibid p. 36

<sup>87</sup> This is of particular significance in regards to the historical understanding of Muslim-Hindu relations given that the even has been grossly manipulated and misrepresented to serve contemporary political agendas. Through a Hindu nationalistic agenda for India advocated by the Indian National Congress (INC) particularly by K. M. Munshi, The historical events concerning Somanāth has been politically manipulated and has now become a byword for Hindu orthodoxy and Hindu-Muslim conflict. For further details see Manu Bhagavan, ‘The Hindutva Underground: Hindu Nationalism and the Indian National Congress in Late Colonial and Early Post-Colonial India.’ *Economic and Political Weekly*. (Mumbai: Economic and Political Weekly, 2008) Vol. 43, No. 37, 39-48. See also Manu Bhagavan, ‘Princely States and the Hindu Imaginary: Exploring the Cartography of Hindu Nationalism in Colonial India’. *The Journal of Asian Studies*. (Chicago: Cambridge University Press, 2008) Vol. 67, 881-915

In order to avoid one mistaking that this trajectory of inquiry is a sort of digression from the topic of Islamic universalism, it is perhaps worthy to remind readers that by discussing Maḥmūd's relationship with India and Hindus, the context of al-Bīrūnī's contribution can be better understood and the popular image of Maḥmūd as being a single minded warmonger can be corrected. During the course of this discussion, greater dynamics of Muslim-Hindu relations will become apparent and readers will notice how the practical demands of managing civil society, among other considerations, form a basis for Muslim-Hindu cooperation. On acknowledging the existence of a more sophisticated Maḥmūd-India (Muslim-Hindu) dynamic, one is compelled to question the popular perception that Islam is a rigid and selfish faith by virtue of the evidence that suggests that Islam is flexible and embracing. Maḥmūd's management of Hindus was in no way similar to the governance of the Romans who conquered and imposed a foreign system of governance wherein local inhabitants (anybody who was not Roman) did not enjoy any significant rights or protections from the state. Clarifying this point is important in order to prevent al-Bīrūnī's sense of Islamic universalism being overshadowed by a particularistic leader.

### **Conclusion**

Over the course of this paper, it has been argued that the variables identified in al-Bīrūnī's introduction to the *Tahqīq* appear to be in reference to the campaign of Somanāth. Quite surprisingly, a broad canvas of the Muslim-Hindu encounter offers a completely different image. Muslims and Hindus had already established several areas of cooperation that centred largely on commerce. The many and daily interactions between Muslims and Hindus offer an entirely different picture to the social schism proposed by al-Bīrūnī. From their first settlement during the expedition of Muḥammad bin Qāsim in the seventh century, Muslim merchant communities became the instrument for Hindu rajas to access international trade with Persia, the Middle East and beyond. There was a clear working relationship between Muslims and Hindus, which was respected by both parties to the extent that in certain kingdoms special courts were established to

govern the internal issues among Muslims. Furthermore, in cases where there were grievances between Muslims and Hindus, Muslims were often supported by the rulers as they trade partnerships were often formed between the ruling classes and Muslim merchants. With such a background, it is difficult to accept that Hindus reacted to foreigners, especially Muslims, in such a violent manner as to depict Muslims as devils and exclude and isolate all those who associated with them.

However, an explanation for al-Bīrūnī's assertions is that al-Bīrūnī was talking on a creedal level and was addressing learned Muslims, and as such believed that existing platforms of exchange and interaction were superficial and were not conducive to lasting and meaningful cross-civilizational and cross-cultural understanding. The Muslim settler communities also existed under the political auspices of the Hindus, when this changed during the expeditions of Maḥmūd, this created a new social order in which Hindus no longer felt their lands were secure and may have blamed Muslims for it. Furthermore, we know the Hindus were deeply upset over the destruction of the Somanāth temple, which cultivated a heightened aversion to Muslims. However, such an image appears to have been relevant only on a religious or theoretical level. What is certain is that overall, the coastal region of Gujarat and south-west India was home to a successful, vibrant, and continuous international trade that saw Muslims and Hindus work together for the economic prosperity of all.

In regards to Maḥmūd's governance, although it is evident that Maḥmūd's military prowess was no match for the Hindus, his governance as suzerain of Sind was largely driven by political and economic motives. On one hand, Maḥmūd sought legitimisation from the Caliph in Baghdad for the expansion of his empire through the rhetoric of *jihād*. On the other, he sought to consolidate the newly augmented sources of wealth by ensuring that a degree of stability was achieved through minting new currency containing Hindu symbolism that was in line with Muslim sensibilities, and by appointing local rulers to manage those territories. One should not mistakenly believe that the expeditions were solely aimed at plundering Hind and that after conquest the Ghaznavids returned to

Ghaznah and left the Hindus to their devastation. The Ghaznavids introduced systems to govern what they believed to be strategic conquests in order to secure ongoing sources of income to fuel the Ghaznavid Empire. Doubtless, this is a far cry from the type of Muslim-Hindu relations demanded by al-Bīrūnī, however, it is nonetheless better than the image of Maḥmūd as a devastator of lands. In such a context, Maḥmūd is depicted as a politician in charge of a vast and rapidly growing empire.

With all this being said and done, the fundamental postulate of al-Bīrūnī that Maḥmūd's military prowess was a source of indignation of the Hindus stands. However, what should be borne in mind is that such a sentiment is a natural consequence of defeat and would have been easily associated with the most conscientious and compassionate of conquerors. Al-Bīrūnī is therefore justified for considering it an important factor necessitating a discourse on Islamic universalism, as there was a need to console the Hindus to the fact that the Muslim presence in the region was eminent, and therefore there is a need to forge new bonds of fraternity that appease the political, economic, social, and religious conscience of all parties. Such foundations were sought by al-Bīrūnī in the form of a thorough understanding of the religious civilization of the Hindus that would agree with Islamic sensibilities. For this reason, al-Bīrūnī opted to focus on the tawhidic strain of Brahman Hinduism as a means for effective integration between to religious communities. Clearly he intended to advance Muslim-Hindu relations to an entirely different level whereby the study of Hindu sciences along with their religious underpinnings would lead towards forging a much more fruitful, meaningful, and lasting relationship compared to one based on economic interests.

Another important observation that must be kept in mind when thinking of the past and Muslim-Hindu relations is that diverse interpretations and representations are not a refusal to accept the event but reflect different strategies of representation and the various ways in which the narrative is politicized to give shape to identities. This is particularly true of the interpretations given to the events surrounding Somanāth, which has been used as a catalyst to explain Muslim-Hindu political relations, whereas al-Bīrūnī used it to

emphasise the need for Islam to be represented in the context of Muslim-Hindu relations. What adds to the complexity of the issue is that there is an underlying attempt to project a single authoritative version of events. In reading these narratives, their politics and the role of these politics in legitimizing power and sectarian authority have to be understood. The narratives are not literal descriptions of what actually happened although some claim to be so.

There is an unavoidable non-religious character of Maḥmūd's expeditions which is made obvious once the salient features of the spirit of the age and the imperial ambitions of Maḥmūd to establish a strong empire seated in central Asia are properly recognised and understood. There is a strong case to argue that Maḥmūd's designs in Hind were largely economic in nature and religion played a convenient political and military tool at best. The Ghaznavid army was not made up of religious zealots but with enlisted and paid troops accustomed to fight for the cause of their employer. There is no credible evidence to suggest that Maḥmūd sought Hindu conversion to Islam and the administrative system left in Hind appears to have been structured more so for the augmentation of new revenues rather than any meaningful attempt for governance. Maḥmūd's introduction of bilingual and multicultural currency can be seen as evidence of his readiness to compromise in order to affect some form of workable relationship with the Hindus. However, Ghaznavid administration would have undoubtedly fallen to his ministers as Maḥmūd spent his life occupied with military exploits.

Based on this understanding, the pillage of temples and destruction of Hindu religious symbols should be viewed under the pretext of political and military strategy and should by no means be attributed to Islam. The search for Islamic universalism is thus left to a more academic pursuit and should be sought for not in the example of Maḥmūd but in al-Bīrūnī's narrative in the *Taḥqīq* which for all intents and purposes, consists of a blueprint for human and cross-civilizational integration.

Al-Bīrūnī explained that his *Taḥqīq* was designed to serve as a means to discuss and interact with the Hindus. Were Muslims not already interacting with them? What was absent within existing platforms of Muslim-Hindu relations that encouraged al-Bīrūnī to

endeavour his work in the *Tahqīq*? There were established commercial relations and some system of governance. Although al-Bīrūnī must have almost certainly been aware of these existing platforms of exchange and interaction, this paper argues that he purposely chose not to mention them because firstly he thought them to be superficial and perhaps emanating from “motives of questionable cupidity and animosity”.<sup>88</sup> More importantly, there had been little to no interaction between learned Muslims and learned Hindus. This justifies al-Bīrūnī’s endeavour whilst explaining the sense in which he referred to Maḥmūd, in that the political and economic interaction were the more dominant platforms of exchange. These platforms clearly did not express purely Islamic sentiments and as such failed to represent Islam. As was the case of Muslim scholarship on Hindus and Hinduism, the existence of platforms of exchange is no guarantee that such platforms, in the manner they currently exist, are conducive to forging a new society consisting of both Muslims and Hindus. As has been demonstrated, the motives for the economic and political interaction with the Hindus were all the result of motives other than religious, and as such, they lacked the power of religion to transcend petty disputes and differences and consolidate a new community based on meaningful and lasting foundations. A new vision was needed of how Muslims perceive the Hindus. It is with this in mind that al-Bīrūnī drew in the propensity of Islam to overcome apparent differences and identify points of similarity recognisable to objective learned Muslims. In al-Bīrūnī we find an attempt to approach Muslim-Hindu relations from the point of view of a learned and committed Muslim scholar, not a politician or merchant with their mundane and worldly pursuits. In short, al-Bīrūnī approached the *Tahqīq* with a certain purpose in mind, namely to set the scene for a narrative on Islamic universalism that would facilitate the application of Islamic values in the study and appropriate of Hindu learning. Irrespective of the greater complexity inherent within the variables with which al-Bīrūnī framed his discussion, fundamental changes to the frame of mind of both Muslims and Hindus were still very much needed to bring about a meaningful and sustainable relationship between Muslims and Hindus.

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<sup>88</sup> Sachau, *India*. Vol. 1, 4; al-Bīrūnī, *Tahqīq*, 2