Umarkot: A Historic City of Sind

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Umarkot, though an insignificant town in the desest, has seen and observed many vicissitude in the history of Sind. Many a time it saw an unexpected invader attacking and occupying it. Many a time it welcomed the helpless fugitives seeking shelter against some powerful enemy. Many a time it witnessed the bloody wars and skirmishes around its ramparts. These varied features of Umarkot give it an important place in the history of Sind. The present paper will only examine the historical events which occurred in or round Umarkot and analyse how this small town played its role in these happenings.

The Town and the Fort

There is a controversy on the name of the town; whether it is Umarkot or Amarkot. In the Persian sources the name is found in both versions: Umarkot and Amarkot. There is one version that the town was built by Rana Amar Sing[1]; in another version it was founded by Umar Sumra[2]. There is a third version put forward by Tod, who writes that Umara-Sumra was the sub-division of the Pramara Rajputs who settled in the Thar desert and inhabited the town which was known as Umarkot[3]. Still the people of the Thar desert pronounce it as Amarkot, but outside it is popularly known as Umarkot.

Umarkot soon became an important town in the Thar desert and played an active part in the history as it is situated on the high road in Sind from the Eastward[4] and linked the highway between Marwar and the Valley of Indus. This made it the key of the desert and it became strategically and commercially a very significant town[5]. Though it is not certain when the town was inhabited, yet it is sure

that it existed in ancient times. Yuan Chwang, who visited India in 641, most likely visited Umarkot, too[6]. It is said that Rana Amar Sing built it in 11th Century[7], and the present city was rebuilt on its ancient foundations[8].

There is a small fort, not strong enough to face a powerful army. The present fort was built in 1746 by the Kalhora ruler Nur Muhammad (d. 1755), definitely on the ancient site of the fort which was either built by the Sumras or the Sodas[9]. During the Talpur period 400 soldiers were kept in the fort to defend it in case of any invasion from Jodhpur[10].

Umarkot under the Soda Rajputs

The importance of Umarkot increased when it came under the Soda Rajputs, the tribe whose energy and vitality made Umarkot immortal in the history of Sind. The Sodas, who became the rulers of Umarkot, were the desert people. According to Tod, in all probability, they were the Sogdi of Alexander[11]. He further traces the roots of the Soda tribe and reaches the conclusion that it was the branch of the Pramara Rajputs. Their sub-division was Umara-Sumra, and from this derived the name of Umarkot and the Umara-Sumra[12]. In one version the Pramara Sodas, who were living in the Thar desert for many centuries, or some say that they came from Ujjain, captured Umarkot in 1226 from the Sumras, or it was given to them by the Sumra rulers[13]. But there is a story in Tod's Annals of Rajasthan which leads us to believe that the fort came under the Soda before 1226. In 1219, the Rana of Soda came into conflict with Chachech Deo, who attacked the Rana and took him by surprise. The Rana gathered 4,000 soldiers and resisted the invader. He was defeated and took shelter in his capital Umarkot[14]. However, Umarkot became the chief town of the Sodas after the occupation and since then it remained under their control in spite of all political changes.

The ruler of the fort had the title of Rana. Though he acted independently, yet he acknowledged the overlordship of the rulers of Sind. When Sind was under the Sultans of Delhi and the Mughul Emperors, the Rana paid them tribute. On the succession, the new

Rana received the recognition either from the Mughul Emperor or his viceroy from Thatta[15].

The Rana of Umarkot had ups and downs in his relations with Jaisalmer, a neighbouring state. In 1219, the Rana had already fought a battle with Chachech Deo. But later on the Rana tried to maintain good relations with the rulers of Jaisalmer. Munjum Rao, son of Mungal Rao took refuge in Umarkot as a result of some invasion to his country. When he became the ruler, the Rana of the Sodas offered him the hand of his daughter. He accepted the offer and the marriage took place at Umarkot[16].

The matrimonial alliance helped the Sodas of Umarkot to protect them from their powerful neighbours. As the women of the Soda tribe were famous for their beauty and charm, the ruling classes of Sind wanted to marry them. There were many instances that the leading people of Sind during different periods married the Soda women. The Sodas, in return, secured protection and safety.

Umarkot: The Birth place of Akbar

Umarkot has the honour to be the birth place of Akbar. Humayun, after the defeat by Sher Shah, reached there in a state of destitute in 1542. He was received by the Rana of the fort known as Prasad (Wirsal). Gulbadan Begam, the sister of Humayun, gives a vivid description of the reception:

> The rana gave the Emperor an honourable reception, and assigned him excellent quarters. He gave places outside to the amirs' people. Many things were very cheap indeed; four goats could be had for one rupi. The rana made many gifts of kids and so on, and paid such fitting service that what language could set it forth[17].

The Rana vacated the middle portion of the fort for his royal guests. Akbar was, therefore, born inside the fort and not outside as is generally believed[18].

Humayun left the fort as it could not accommodate his army. The Rana helped Humayun against Shah Hassan, who had killed his

father, and assisted the Emperor by giving 2,000 or 3,000 soldiers. The help proved ineffective as mutiny broke out in the Rana's army and the soldiers were dispersed[19].

Hamida Banu left Umarkot when Akbar was five weeks old. Akbar never visited Umarkot but he had emotional attachment to his birth place. When Mir Abul Qasim Khan Zaman, from the Beglar family, met Akbar with Jani Beg, the ruler of Sind, Akbar asked him about his birth place. He told Umarkot. Akbar was pleased and said, "I and the Sayyid have the same birth place"[20].

Umarkot during the Turkhan Period

During the Turkhan period the Beglar family played an active role in the history of Umarkot. Mir Sayyid Qasim Beglar came from Samarqand to Sind during the period of Shah Hussain of Arghun. He was given the governorship of Umarkot. In this capacity he helped the Soda Rajputs of Umarkot against the Rathors. The Sodas were impressed by his bravery and courage and offered him to marry one of their women. He readily accepted the offer and the daughter of Rana Kuya Wairsi, known as Rajiya was married to him[21]. From this marriage was born Mir Abul Qasim Khan Zaman, who became very important figure during the Turkhan period.

After the death of Isa Khan (d. 1527), Mirza Baqi (d. 1585) became the ruler. His younger brother Jan Baba was not happy with him and revolted against him. He, after the revolt, marched towards Umarkot in order to take refuge there. At that time the Rana of Umarkot was Rana Bana (Tata), son of Rana Kanka Waisa (Waisar). Khan Zaman was at that time in the service of Jan Baba, who intended to send him to Umarkot to occupy it on his behalf. When the Rana heard about it, he sent a message to Jan Baba that he was ready to surrender the fort and requested him to send some of his trusted nobles. Jan Baba chose Khan Zaman and Mirza Mazaq for the negotiations. The Rana at the same time dispatched a secret message to Mirza Baqi about the whereabout of Jan Baba and his intention to come to Umarkot. Mirza Baqi, on receiving the information, suddenly attacked Jan Baba at Nasrpur and defeated him. When this news reached the Rana, he asked Khan Zaman and Mirza

Mazaq not to stay in the fort and leave it immediately. Thus, the Rana by joining Mirza Baqi, saved Umarkot from Jan Baba[22].

Khan Zaman, later on, joined Mirza Baqi, who ordered him to march against Rana Megraj of Umarkot, kill him and exile his family from the fort. On the approach of Khan Zaman, the Rana was frightened and left the fort along with his family. Khan Zaman easily occupied the fort. After the occupation, he enquired whether there was any capable person from the Wairsi family to whom he could bestow Umarkot? He was told that Rana Bakar Wairsi was the befitting man to be the Rana of the fort. Khan Zaman, therefore, placed him on the post of Rana and himself returned to Nasarpur[23].

Khan Zaman was destined to play another important role in the affairs of Umarkot. As it is referred back, the government of Umarkot was under the rulers of Sind. They bestowed it whomsoever they liked and deprived whenever they thought it prudent. When Abdur Rahim Khan Khanan conquered Sind, he might have heard about the beauty of the Soda women and wished to marry within the family of the Rana. As the Rana of Megraj of Umarkot had no daughter suitable for Khan Khanan, he offered the hand of his brother Man Sing's daughter[24].

The relationship of Man Sing with Khan Khanan put him in an advantageous position. After the death of Rana Megraj, Jani Beg bestowed the government of Umarkot to his son Kishan Das. This created hostility between him and Man Sing, who was aspiring for the post of Rana. Kishan Das, knowing the intention of his uncle, ousted him from the fort and himself assumed all powers. Man Sing could not tolerate the brunt, as he was the father-in-law of the powerful and influential Mughul noble. He sent his son to Khan Khanan to complain against Kishan Das. At that time Khan Khanan and Jani Beg were with Akbar at Burhanpur. Khan Khanan, after knowing the affairs of Umarkot, requested Jani Beg to favour Man Sing. Thereupon Jani Beg immediately wrote to Khan Zaman to place Man Sing on the post of Rana and asked Kishan Das not to oppose it. Khan Zaman, after getting the order, marched towards Umarkot along with Man Sing. Kishan Das refused to hand over

his post to Man Sing and prepared to offer the resistance. At Samara both armies faced each other. As Kishan Das had relation with Khan Zaman, some people tried to stop the conflict and open the negotiation between Kishan Das and Khan Zaman. Kishan Das expressed that he considered himself a servant of Khan Zaman, but Man Sing was responsible for creating all these troubles, and he would oppose that Man Sing should be placed on the post of Rana. Khan Zaman insisted to fulfil the command of Jani Beg and betow the Ranaship to Man Sing. However, on the persuasion of his friends, Kishan Das came to the camp of Khan Zaman, submitted respectfully, and presented his horse as present. He encamped with Khan Zaman. Apparently all was over, and every body was happy that the peace was restored. But all of a sudden trouble was started, as some people of the Samija tribe entered the fields of the Sodas and started to pillage and plunder. This brought the two parties into conflict. Kishan Das, in the beginning wanted to fight, but later on he changed his mind and escaped. Khan Zaman marched towards Umarkot. The son of Kishan Das was in the fort, but he was not powerful enough to fight against him, therefore, he took some money and left the fort undefended. Khan Zaman easily occupied the fort and imprisoned the family of the Rana. As the family was related to him, it was treated with respect and was not molested, but the town was plundered and looted by the conquering army regardless of any human feelings. The temples were demolished, cows were slaughtered, and the inhabitants were tortured and mistreated. Khan Zaman himself passed his time in pleasure and merry-making.

The occupation of the fort, the deprivation of the Rana from his right, and the violation of their religious tenets infuriated the Soda tribe, who assembled under the Rana to take revenge. They made the preparation to march to Umarkot to fight against the army of Khan Zaman. When he received the news, he was greatly alarmed and wished to avoid the war by all means. Therefore, he left Umarkot and marched towards Kishan Das. He reached Gaddi, where the Rana was staying with his army. He sent his son and the nobles to the Rana for negotiations. The Rana was persuaded not to fight and come to terms with Khan Zaman. After some discussion

and assurance, the Rana came to the camp of Khan Zaman and was welcomed by him. The Rana was treated with respect and was awarded a horse, a robe of honour, and some plundered property was restored to him. Thus, Khan Zaman settled the affairs of Umarkot peacefully[25].

Umarkot under the Kalhoras

Muhammad Shah (1719-1748), the Mughul Emperor, after the retirement of Sadiq Khan, the last Mughul governor of Sind, gave the country to Nur Muhammad Kalhora in 1736. He had not yet fully established himself that Nadir Shah, on his way back from Delhi, invaded Sind in 1739. Nur Muhammad, in order to avoid the war and to protect himself, escaped to Umarkot. He was sure that Nadir Shah would not dare to cross the desert with his army, and if he would attempt to attack Umarkot, in this case he would take refuge in the desert of Marwar. Nadir Shah proved a man of determination. He was not the man to allow Nur Muhammad to stay in Umarkot without submission. He immediately marched, reached Umarkot and surprised Nur Muhammad, who was on the point to escape to the desert. It is said that he had already buried his treasure, sent his family to the desert in a safe place, and himself stayed only to manage the conveyance for two lakh rupees. When Nadir Shah besieged the fort and Nur Muhammad saw no hope to escape, he surrendered. When he appeared before Nadir Shah, he was very angry and asked him, "why have you escaped and taken refuge in this place?" Nur Muhammad replied, "My eight generations have served the Emperor of Hindustan, If I joined your service immediately, people would have called me traitor and faithless person". Nadir Shah was pleased by Nur Muhammad's reply and awarded him a robe of honour, a horse, and a sword. He also bestowed him his country. Nur Muhammad in return paid one crore rupees and promised to pay him regular tribute[26].

Secured on the throne, the Kalhora ruler tried to consolidate his power and extend his territories. The Sodas of Umarkot were the victim of this political change. They were pressed by the two powerful neighbours: the Rathors and the Kalhoras. As a result of their combined efforts they lost the political authority over Umarkot

and the Thar desert. In 1750, Umarkot was finally incorporated into the Kalhora territory and the Rana was ousted from the fort. As it ceased to be the chief town of the Sodas, it reduced to an insignificant town and lost all past glory. The Rana, afterwards, settled in the Thar desert, and the Soda tribe recognized the overlordship of the Rana and paid him tribute[27].

After the death of Nur Muhammad in 1755, Diwan Gidu Mal manoeuvred to place Muhammad Murad Yab Khan on the throne. He was at that time staying in Umarkot. When the news of his succession spread, all the leading men and nobles went to Umarkot to congratulate him. Muhammad Murad Yab Khan received the news of his succession in Umarkot and celebrated his coronation at Nasarpur[28].

Umarkot saw the drama of civil war between the Kalhoras and the Talpurs. When Mir Bijar, one of the prominent Talpur leaders, came back from the pilgrimage, he came to know about the tyrannies done by the Kalhora ruler to the Talpur family. This made the two parties hostile to each other and an encounter was inevitable. Mir Bijar, to make the preparations, retired to Umarkot and occupied it without fighting[29].

On hearing this news, Taja Laikhi (d. 1782), son of Raja Laikhi, along with Ghulam Nabi, the Kalhora ruler, invaded Umarkot to crush the power of Mir Bijar. He had 30,000 soldiers, yet to fight against Mit Bijar and to occupy the fort with power was not possible. Therefore, he invented a trick to take the fort without fighting. He sent Allah Bakhsh Jhanjan to Mir Bijar, who pretended to be against Taja Laikhi. He complained against him and persuaded Mir Bijar to hand over the fort to the men of Ghulam Nabi as an expression of his loyalty. Mir Bijar, on his advice, left the fort and handed over its keys to Allah Bakhsh Jhanjan[30]. Taja Laikhi immediately sent two thousand soldiers and enough ammunition in the fort to control it. After the occupation of the fort, Mir Bijar was neglected and no attempt was made to negotiate with him. This forced Mir Bijar to declare war against the Kalhoras. The battle took place at Laniyari (near Shahdadpur) in which Mir Bijar defeated Taja Laikhi. Taja Laikhi, after knowing that Ghulam Nabi was in link with Mir Bijar, killed him[31].

Mir Bijar emerged powerful after the conflict. He, however, did not usurp the power and recognized Abdul Nabi as the new ruler of Sind.

Mir Bijar regarded Umarkot an important town and in order to have complete control, he ousted the Soda tribe from there. This brought him into conflict with the Raja of Jodhpur, Bijay Sing. The relations were further deteriorated when Mir Bijar asked the hand of one of the Raja's daughters. The Raja took an insult and the war broke out between Sind and Jodhpur[32]. At the same time the Raja got an unexpected help from the ruling family of Sind, who were afraid of Mir Bijar and his increasing influence. A secret message was sent to the Raja that if Mir Bijar was assassinated by him, the fort of Umarkot would be given to him in return. As a result of this secret pact, Mir Bijar was killed dramatically in 1779 by the two Rajputs sent by the Raja. According to the pact Umarkot was handed over to Bijay Sing[33].

After the possession of Umarkot, Bijay Sing reinstated the Rana of Soda Rajputs in Umarkot and it became one of the parganas of Jodhpur. The Rana paid tribute to the Raja of Jodhpur[34].

Umarkot time and again provided refuge to the Talpur family against the wrath and conspiracy of the Kalhora rulers. When Abdul Nabi in his struggle against the Talpurs sought the help from Timur Shah (d. 1793), the Afghan ruler, he sent Madad Khan to Sind for his help. The Talpur leaders Mir Abdullah Khan, Mir Fath Ali Khan, and Mir Ghulam Ali Khan took shelter in Umarkot. Madad Khan plundered and devastated Sind and went as far as Umarkot. The fort, however, saved and protected the Talpurs and in this way helped them to win their battle against the Kalhoras[35].

Umarkot under the Talpurs

In 1783 the Talpurs came into power under the leadership of Mir Fath Ali Khan, who established the political power of the Talpur family. The Talpur rulers, in view of their previous experiences, regarded Umarkot an important town for the refuge as they feared the Afghan invasion. They thought it prudent to occupy it. They

made several attempts from time to time to capture it, but in 1813 Umarkot was finally annexed by the Talpurs[36]. The Talpurs, to check the forces of the Raja, even pushed their army into the territories of Jodhpur[37]. Though Umarkot was recovered by the Talpurs, it remained a bone of contention between Sind and Jodhpur. The Raja never accepted the sovereignty of the Mirs of Sind over Umarkot and claimed it as a part of his state.

When James Burnes visited Sind in 1827, he mentioned Ghulam Allah Laghari, who was at that time incharge of Umarkot[38]. Postans and Burnes point out another important aspect of Umarkot: that it served a place where the treasury of the Kalhoras and Talpurs was hidden. James Burnes writes, "Where is reported the members of the Sind government have treasure to the amount of several crore of rupees."[39]

Umarkot under the British

After the battle of Dabo (1843) Sir Charles Napier sent Fitz Gerald from Mirpur to Umarkot. It was rumoured that it was made as a rallying point by the Talpurs and was strongly garrisoned. When Fitz Gerald reached the fort, he found the rumour was baseless. The fort, after some negotiation, surrendered without resistance. Fitz Gerald was appointed as in charge of the fort[40]. After the occupation of Umarkot, Sind was completely conquered by the Britishers[41].

The Raja of Jodhpur, after the conquest of Sind, opened negotiations with the British government on the issue of Umarkot. He demanded it to be given to him (for details, see Appendix).

British government incorporated Umarkot in Hyderabad collectorate. Ten years later it was suggested to give it to the Rao of Kuch, but the proposal was rejected. In 1856 it was finally merged in Sind[42]. In 1859, the Rana of Umarkot, along with some local Zamindars, revolted against the British administration. They attacked the telegraph office, killed some policemen, and occupied the town, but action was immediately taken and the revolt was crushed[43].

An event that took place in Umarkot during the British period, though of less importance, yet it brought the name of Umarkot in

limelight, was that Eddy Robert, the sixth Commissioner of Sind, held a darbar in 1867 in Umarkot and Mir Shah Muhammad Khan, a resident of Mirpur Khas, was awarded the title of Sitara-i-Hind and a medal[44].

In 1869, a severe famine occurred in Marwar and the Thar including Umarkot. Such was the condition of the people that they sold their children in extreme poverty[45]. In 1876, Sir Charles Temple, the governor of Bombay, who was also a Persian scholar, in order to know the condition of Sind, also visited Umarkot[46]. In 1889, the eleventh Commissioner of Sind, Sir Charles Pritchard, visited Umarkot[47].

Conclusion

Umarkot, as an isolated fort, situated in the desert, was an ideal place for refuge. So it happened that on different occasions, eminent personalities sought refuge in Umarkot in order to protect themselves from their enemies. The history shows that Umarkot always welcomed them and provided them not only refuge but other facilities. Humayun, Mirza Baqi, Mir Bijar, the Talpur leaders, and other prominent persons stayed in Umarkot during the time of trouble. In 1843, after the British conquest, Mir Sher Muhammad Khan went to Umarkot with some army with the intention to fight against them[48]. Thus, the role which was played by Umarkot in the history of Sind, made it one of the significant towns of Sind.

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Notes and References

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11. Tod, ii, p. 181 n. 1.
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13. Ibid., p. 11.
14. Tod, ii, p. 197.
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16. Tod, ii, p. 181.
17. Gulbadan Begam: *Humayun Nama*, Ed. by A. S. Beveridge, London 1909, p. 58; (English), pp. 156–57; Mohomed Kasim Ferishta: *History of the Rise of the Mohomeden Power in India, till the year A.D. 1612*, Engl. Trans. by J. Briggs, Lahore 1977, i, 95.

18. Mir Ma'sum Bakkhari: *Tarikh-i-Ma'sumi*, Poona 1838, p. 177; *Tuhfat al-Kiram*, p. 124; Khudadad Khan: *Lubb-i-Tarikh-i-Sind*, Hyderabad 1959, p. 68: Sir Bartle Frere, the Commissioner, visited Umarkot in 1853, after an inquiry from the old men of the town he fixed a stone at the probable birth place of Akbar. But from the original sources it is clear that Akbar was born inside and not outside the fort.

19. Gulbadan Begam, p. 157; Ferishta, i, p. 95; Ma'sumi, p. 178; Sayyid Mir Muhammad b. Sayyid Jalal Thattawi: *Turkhan Nama*, Hyderabad 1965, pp. 34-35.

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یکے قلعه بودش عمرکوت نام — بدشت تهی مانده ز آب و کنام
بروجش بکیوان بر افراشته — بسا ذوقه وافر انباشته
ز آبادی آن قلعهٔ استوار — چو بدور سی فرسخ از رهگذار
گمان کرد کا فواج ایران سپاه — بر آن در نخواهند پیموده راه
بد آن قلعه آرام کرد و نشست — بخودداری از کین برآورده دست
جهانجو چون آگه شد از مدعا — که او را بود در عمرکوت جا
بیکروز و یکشب که راه کرد طی — به نزدیک آن قلعه بردند پی
گرفتند آن لشکر بیکران — چو خاتم عمرکوت را درمیان

27. Tod, ii, p. 253; Raikes, pp. 5-6.
28. Mihr, ii, pp. 575-78.
29. Ibid., pp. 740-41.
30. Ibid , p. 744.
31. Ibid., pp. 746-47, 752.
32. Tod, ii, pp. 254-55.
33. Mihr, ii, pp. 790, 879; Aitken, p. 114: Tod, ii, pp. 254-55, 790.
34. Ibid., p. 255; Mihr, ii, pp. 851-52.
35. Ibid., pp. 831-32, 851-52; Aitken, p. 115.
36. Tod, ii, p. 253; Hughes, p. 118; Sorley, p. 174.
37. Alexander Burnes: *Travels into Bokhara and a Voyage on the Indus*, London 1834. Reprinted, Karachi 1975, iii, p. 214.
38. James Burnes: *A Visit to the Court of Sind*, London 1829. Reprinted, Karachi 1974, pp. 111-12.
39. Ibid., pp. 111-12; T. Postans: *Personal Observations on Sindh; the Manners and Customs of its Inhabitants; and its Productive Capabilities*, London 1843. Reprinted, Karachi 1973, pp. 28-29: "this was long looked upon as the depository of the accumulated wealth of the Kalhoras and Talpurs, and the point in which the chiefs would make a stand in case of an invasion of their country".
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43. Ibid., pp. 138-39.
44. Khudadad Khan, p. 187.
45. Ibid., p. 195.
46. Ibid., p. 201.
47. Ibid., p. 231.
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