

MULTAN: AN IMPORTANT TRADE CENTRE AND GREAT TRADE ROUTE

By

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Multan's antiquity lies in its geographical situation. Since ages it has maintained its importance as a political, religious as well as a trade centre and a great trade route. From time immemorial it attracted the business community of Central Asia and South Asia. Originally the town was situated on the left bank of river Ravi which centuries ago deserted its old channel and presently it flows past 40 miles from the town. The town remained four miles on the left bank of river Chenab which never changed its channel. Multan became famous for its agricultural produce as the secret of the fertility of its soil always remained flood waters of rivers of Chenab and Ravi. The rivers were without marked high banks, therefore, several canals were dug up to utilize their water for irrigating the land. The economy of Multan was based on its trade with different parts of the world. The Chinese traveller Hiuen Tsang¹ who visited Multan in October 641 A.D confirmed the fertility of its soil. He writes that 'the people love learning and honour the virtuous'. The same way during his visit to Multan in 915 A.D. the famous Arab geographer, Al-Masudi² recorded that the country was well cultivated. He must have seen the best crops in Multan and he definitely found active commerce between Multan and other parts of the world i.e. why he recorded that trade caravans were passing between Multan and Khurasan. According to him Multan had communication with Zablistan and Sijistan by way of Ghazni and Qandahar. Istakhri³ also visited Multan in 951 A.D. and he has confirmed the views expressed by Al-Masudi. Istakhri found Multan as a centre of political and cultural activities. He observed that the prosperity of Multan attracted traders from different parts of Muslim world. As Multan was situated on the main high-way providing the facilities to the traders to exchange their notes during their visit in connection with their business it gradually acquainted the local people with the knowledge of different parts of Central Asia, Arab world and South Asia. Muqdisi⁴ who visited Multan in 985 A.D. confirmed that the elites of the town spoke Persian and Arabic alongwith the local

language. He praised their moral character and found the people of Multan honest in their dealings. He has confirmed it that fertility of Multan was due to the rivers water and Multan was known for its sufficient agricultural produce specially cotton and wheat. Its geographical situation and strategic importance was felt by all the Sultans of Delhi and a strong contingent was always stationed here. Multan was declared a second line of defence during the Mongol Invaders. Being an agricultural producing territory, it became a halting place for the invaders to collect supplies. In such circumstances the Delhi Sultans made sufficient arrangements for its defence. Its rulers encouraged trade and commerce, and stationed the best available force for the protection of trade route. Thus it attracted merchants from Central Asia and 'here came the traders from across the border with rich manufactures of Balukh and Bukhara and the luscious fruit of Samarqand and Qandahar. It added to the affluence of the Multani merchants who became rich and prosperous money lenders⁵.

Multan remained an important trade centre and great trade route during all the times. Abu-al-Fazal writes ⁶ that it was one of the biggest provinces of the Mughal Empire, its length from Firospur to Siwistan was 403 kos and its breadth from Khatpur to Jaisalmir was 108 kos. During the period of Sher Shah Suri Multan was linked with all important trade centers of the realm by road as he constructed several roads including Grand Trunk Road. Safe communication system provided impetus to the business community. People of royal blood took interest in the development of Multan during their stay here as its governors during different times. Being on the caravan routes of Central Asia and South Asia, it proved an important trade centre for centuries. Its importance was enhanced due to its close administrative as well as cultural links with Sind, which is evident from the documents that several times all the resources of Sind alongwith the administrative control were placed under the governors of Multan. The prosperity due to the efforts of its able rulers gave it the name of 'Dar-ul-Aman'. The province of Multan was divided into several units, the largest unit was called 'Sarwar'. Multan had three Sarkars namely 'Multan (proper)' Dipalpur and Bhakkar⁷. These Sarkars were divided further into several parganas and the province of Multan had eighty eight Parganas and each Pargana consisted of several villages⁸. These administrative

units had its own business centres which attracted traders according to its respective production. Certain units were known for their special produce and had direct links with different business centers in Central Asia as well as in South Asia. Commercially Multan was a busy and famous centre of trade. The word Multani became a term for the Indian traders. As Multan was situated on the Qandahar - Quetta route, its rivers namely Indus, Ravi and Chenab provided transport facilities to the people of Multan⁹. The goods from Lahore to Multan and onward were transported through these rivers. The agricultural produce of Multan was sent to different parts of India including Lahore and Agra. In return Multan received manufactured goods of Bengal and Southern India¹⁰. Multan was famous for its indigo export¹¹. Tobacco and Poppy were sown in the rich and highly irrigated land. Multan was also famous for its cottage industry where coarse cloth was manufactured for home consumption¹². It had speciality in manufacturing the multi-coloured printed cloth known as Chient. The same way Multan had a good leather industry and it was considered the home for it.

During the early Muslim period, Multan emerged as a flourishing city and its economic prosperity attracted the people of other regions to trade with the local merchants. The Arabs spread Islam and succeeded in establishing law and order in their domain. Being experts in trade, they patronised the local goods and due to their export policy, Multan became a centre of trade. They developed relations with the Muslim world. The Arab rulers paid special attention to make the caravan routes safe which encouraged traders of different regions to bring their commodities to Multan in exchange of local produce. The Multani traders proved to be honest in their dealings which gave them good name in business world. There was no warfare in Multan for two centuries. It was during the Qirmathian period that the local people complained against their rigid religious views which ultimately induced Sultan Mahmud of Ghazni to invade it and annexed it permanently in 1010 A.D. It opened a new era and Multan developed its relations with different parts of Central Asia. Multan's economic prosperity invited the attention of traders from Ghazni, Kabul, Qandahar, Khurasan, Turkistan and Balkh. With the establishment of a strong central authority in India, the trade routes became safe and the people of different sections developed relations which also paved the way for the

arrival of saints from Central Asia. Thus Suhrawardi Silsila was introduced in Multan and Sind by Hazrat Bahauddin Zakariya whose disciples promoted the cause of Islam in different parts of South Asia. India's economic prosperity attracted the attention of Mongols in the thirteenth century. Multan's geographical situation made it a gateway to India; thus the Mongols invasions became a regular feature which gradually decreased its known economic prosperity. It also decreased its agricultural produce and made the trade routes unsafe. Thus the known trade centre of Multan received a great setback during the Mongols invasions. Being a frontier province, it was a point of continuous military operation of Mongols whose depredation had made the life of local population miserable. Agricultural and Industrial occupation was not possible: nor could the crops be sown: many times the crops were put on fire and destroyed by the invading armies. Administratively Multan hoisted high the flag of independence under Nasiruddin Qubacha, Kabir Khan and Kashlu Khan for a longer period but ultimately its strategic importance was realised and a definite frontier policy was adopted by Ghias-ud-din Balban who made Multan a big cantonment by posting a strong army. His diplomacy and defensive policy made the province of Multan safe from the Mongol hordes. But these safety measures were neglected by the weak successors. Ibn Battuta visited Multan in 1334 A.D. and he confirmed that during his visit to Multan, the highways were made safe. The miscreants and dacoits were dealt with iron hand by Ghazi Malik, governor of Multan. The Mongols invasions were repulsed. He saw an inscription of Ghazi Malik on the outer wall of Jamia Mosque which ran: 'that I have encountered the Tatars on twenty one occasions and defeated them, and hence I am called Ghazi Malik'¹³. It is evident from this inscription that Multan was an important cantonment situated on the border line of Muslim empire in India.

Multan's geographical location played a vital role in the development of its cultural history. It became a centre of migration of the people and traditions. It was a great trade centre, therefore, people from different areas used to visit it. The advent of the Arabs and the Turks opened the way for cultural contacts between the Muslims and the Hindus of Multan. The intellectual and literary accomplishments of the foreign lands reached Multan through the constant flow of travellers,

traders and poets. This gave a cosmopolitan colour to the local society. Their impact was so great that population started speaking Arabic and Persian along with their mother tongue. The Arabs and the Turks also imitated some of the local traits and adopted local dress and language¹⁴. In the field of literature, there was mutual understanding between the two communities. The Muslim scholars studied Hindu philosophy and sciences while the Hindus learnt from them the subjects like geography and chemistry. The moral standard of the people of Multan was high. It was a common practice of the people to pay their debts without going to the court of law. If the debtor could not pay it off in his life time, his son or grandson was morally bound to make the payment without any hesitation. Muqdisi writes that the people of Multan were honest in their dealings and had good moral character¹⁵.

Multan was basically an agricultural province. River Ravi and River Chenab flowed past it. River water increased the fertility of its soil. It had two crops in a year namely Rabi (wheat) and Kharif (cotton)¹⁶. The land was irrigated by water wheels. Wells were probably the major source of artificial irrigation. Muhammad Tughlaq advanced loans to peasants for digging wells in order to extend cultivation¹⁷. Wells were of two kinds, masonry wells and brickless (cutcha) wells. The latter kind was more popular as the people were poor and could not afford the masonry wells. During 14th century the Turks started digging canals to irrigate the agricultural land as this system was already prevalent in Central Asia. Sultan Ghiyath-al-Din Tughlaq was the pioneer while initiating this system. Government encouraged people by financing and giving land in order to bring more land under plough. Later on following the footsteps of his predecessor, Sultan Firuz took keen interest in digging chains of canals¹⁸ in order to provide facilities to the farmers which ultimately resulted in more agricultural produce. Thus this project brought prosperity of the people. Irfan Habib writes that the people of Multan took keen interest in agriculture, therefore, they dug several canals, big and small, on their own to irrigate the land. These canals were maintained by the landholders¹⁹. The government officials including the village headmen always encouraged peasants to dig canals for the irrigation purpose. Ain-al-Mulk Mahru, an ocular witness to all the happenings in Multan indicates the scarcity of the commodities in the early period of Firuz Shah Tughlaq. According to him the food

grains were selling on exorbitantly high price, for example, Juwar was sold on 80 jital per maund. But with the good efforts of the Sultan the prices of the commodities were controlled and the scarcity disappeared²⁰.

Multan was also known for its cottage industry. Its products were known and were liked by all. As Multan used to produce good cotton, the weavers used to produce good cotton yarn. In every town and village several handlooms were established where people were working and producing fine cloth. These handlooms produced 'Multani chient' which was popular among the people²¹. This industry also used to produce rugs and cotton carpets. The traders used to import raw silk from Central Asia and then silk yarn was prepared which was very popular among the local owners of the handlooms. The Multani rugs and carpets were exceedingly strong and were available in fast colours. Multan was known for its glazed pottery. No evidence has been recorded for its metal industry over here but its continuation during the Mughal period provides its justification.

Multan was a big trading centre due to its geographical location as it was situated on the main highway with direct link to Qandahar, Kabul and Ghazni. It remained a centre of trade and commerce for centuries. Caravans from different areas used to come here and exchanged the goods in the local market. Multan presents the spectacle of a flourishing urban economy. Such an economy must have necessitated commerce on a large scale. Multan was a big market of Arabic horses²². Silk was a profitable item of import, while indigo was exported to Iran²³. Multan drew supplies for its own consumption from quite distant towns in India, candied sugar was imported from Delhi and Lahore, and Ghi from Sarsuti²⁴. The large inland commerce was handled by a large and heterogeneous community of Multan. Barani records that a large amount of long-distance trade was in the hands of persons called 'Multanis'. These 'Multani' merchants were to transport agricultural and other produce from one part of the country to another on a very extensive scale because they had a large stock of bullock carts and intimate knowledge of the roads of the country²⁵. They were so influential that a known merchant of Multan named Hamid-al-Din, 'who from his grandfather had learnt nothing but the taking of interest', was made the chief Qadi by Ala-al-Din Khalji²⁶. But this personage was also

respected in some sufi circles. Barani states that mostly the 'Multanis' were Hindus, who were professionally engaged in usury and commerce²⁷. They were famous for their large scale mercantile activities and were known for fabulous wealth. The secret of their prosperity was also in lending money to the ruling class, who either because of the seasonal variations in the income from their revenue assignments or simply out of improvidence, borrowed heavily from the 'Multanis' and 'Sahs'. Speaking of the nobles of Balban's times Barani says: 'the Multanis' and 'Sahs' of Delhi who have acquired abundant wealth have derived it from the resources (daulat) of the old nobles (Maliks and Amirs) of Delhi. The latter took loans from 'Multanis' and 'Sahs' beyond limit, and repaid the advances with largesses (by draft) upon their provinces (revenue assignments). The moment a Khan or Malik held an assembly and invited notables as guests, his functionaries rushed to the 'Multani' and 'Sahs', and giving them drafts (qabzah) upon themselves took loans at interest'.²⁸ Multani merchants remained important as Sultan Ala-al-Din Khalji gave them money in advance from the state treasury to purchase goods from abroad and sell them in the Sarai Adl at controlled rates. In return of this service they were to receive allowance.²⁹ In this respect Multani merchants were not traders in true sense of the term but they were agents of the government. The same way when Ala-al-Din Khalji attempted to reduce prices of luxury commodities, he advanced 20 lacs of takas to the 'Multanis', to enable them to supply finer goods (aqmosha) regularly to Delhi. This was chiefly because Multan was on trade route and caravans were supposed to stop here while going towards Lahore, Kabul and Qandahar. The government of Multan used to receive from them transit duty on mercantile commodities.

Commerce was mostly in the hands of Hindus. A profitable business was money lending which was confined exclusively to Hindus. These Hindus were called 'Banyan'.³⁰ The city market never had a dull moment and the buyers were found ready as Istakhari says that the market place of Multan was very spacious, big and populous³¹.

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