CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

INDIA AND THE WESTERN COUNTRIES

The geographical continuity of the north-west of India with Eastern Iran and Central Asia, and the contacts, in pre-historic times, of the Indus valley with a wide area of a fairly advanced culture extending right up to the eastern Mediterranean, is now well-known. Trade by sea between India and the West goes back to a very great antiquity. There is a large volume of evidence, numismatic and literary, bearing witness to the varying fortunes of a continuous trade between India and the Roman empire by land as well as by sea. Strabo, the anonymous author of the *Periplus of the Erythrean Sea*, Pliny, and Ptolemy clearly mark different stages in the increasing knowledge of the East that was spreading in the Roman empire. India remained an important intermediary between the West and China, the carriers between Malabar and Malaya being the large ships (Colandia) of Malaya and Coromandeer/rarely Greek or even Chinese vessels; and the Greeks touched India on their way to China as is shown by the Indian wares which, as the Chinese records show, they brought to China from time to time.¹ The old canal leading to Arsinoe (Suez canal) was cleared out by Trajan, and another was opened between the Nile and the Gulf of Suez. He established a Roman fleet on the Red Sea for the defence of the trade with India against pirates. There was a Roman temple at Muziris on the Malabar coast, and it has been plausibly suggested that its foundation was connected with a naval expedition sent by Trajan against the pirates on that coast. The period from the accession of Trajan to a time shortly preceding the death of Marcus Aurelius was the period of Rome’s most widely spread, if not her most intense, commercial intercourse with India and China. Trajan’s gold coins along with Hadrian’s and one of the elder Faustina have been found at Nellore, and one of Trajan at Athiral in the Cuddapah district indicating the extension of trade to the east coast of India.² Ptolemy used for his description of the Indian seas accounts of merchants based on their recent of contemporaneous

¹ E. H. Warmington, *The Commerce Between the Roman Empire and India*. Cambridge, 1928, p. 129.
² Ibid., p. 98.
visits to India, and his emporium was a legal mart in India where foreign trade was officially allowed and taxed. He enumerates nearly forty inland places in the Tamil kingdoms and gives plenty of detail about the Andhras. The chief towns of the Tamils are given with remarkable accuracy and the Roman trade with South India was more prosperous than ever at the end of the first century A.D. and in the second, Roman subjects being resident in all the three Tamil states. Trajan, Hadrian, Pius and Elagabalus received Indian embassies, and the coin hoards in India and the Indian traders in Egypt show how close the connection was. The Kushanas by their unifying conquests helped to open up commerce by land between the Roman empire and India, and to gain due prominence in this trade for the north-west of India, within easy reach from several directions. When Vespasian (A.D. 69-79) took steps to stop the export of Roman gold coins to India, Kadphises II stepped in and created a half-Roman currency of his own acceptable to the Greeks and Syrians, and calculated to establish trade with the West on a sound economic basis. A coin of Menander with one of Vespasian found at Tenby in Pembrokeshire invokes the vision of a Graeco-Roman merchant visiting both India and Britain in pursuit of trade. Other North Indian coins and their imitations have been found in Scandinavia and there are relics of eastern trade along the Oxus-Caspian route.

In the third century there was a falling off in the trade, and for a time India, though much written about in the west, faded away into a land of fancy and fable, India and Indians often coming to mean Ethiopia and the Auxumites or even South Arabia and its people. At his triumph in 274 Aurelian is said to have received ambassadors from India among other countries. There was a revival of trade in the fourth century after the firm establishment of Constantinople and the Eastern Empire; but there could be no comparison with the earlier phase of the first two centuries. Roman coins reappear in South India as well as in the North from Constantius, and increase in the fourth and fifth centuries. Constantine received an Indian embassy in the last year of his life, and Julian (361-3) received embassies from Indian tribes, the people of Maldives and the Ceylonese—Ceylon having become the Centre of Hindu trade in Indian seas. That South Indian products found their way even to Rome at this period is seen from Alaric demanding and getting (in A.D. 408) 3,000 pounds of pepper as part of the ransom of Rome, besides 4,000 silk robes. Gold coins of Theodosii, Marcian, Leo I, Zeno, Anastasius I, and

3 Ibid., pp. 101, 107.
5 C.A.R. XII, p. 247.
6 Warmington, op. cit., pp. 301-02.
7 Ibid., p. 157.
Justinus I (518), and many copper coins of Arcadius, Honorius and others appear in South India and Ceylon, probably brought by intermediaries, though Sewell holds that the presence of Roman agents in Madurai is attested by copper coins found all over the place in two types—an original Roman fabric and a local imitation of it. These conditions continued more or less unchanged till the Arab conquest of Syria, Egypt and Persia in the seventh century A.D. when a new era opened.8

As for North India, stray discoveries of later imperial coins there reflect the activity of Palmyra in promoting trade by land. The luxuries of Commodus (A.D. 180-193), the excesses of Elagabalus and the commercial efforts of Alexander Severus (223-235) might have brought about a revival of trade, but the chief gainer was Palmyra. The Parthian empire under the Persian Sassanids developed commerce, and controlled the Persian gulf as well as the land routes and the silk trade. Only in Northern India reached by land, especially in Bengal, have Roman coins from Gordian (A.D. 238) to Constantine been found. A coins of Theodosius (A.D. 378-95) also comes from the North besides five gold coins of Theodosius, Marcian and Leo in a stūpa at Hadda near Jelalabad.9 Indian philosophy, it is generally admitted, exercised some influence on the development of Neo-Platonism. The presence of an Indian colony in the valley of the Upper Euphrates and its destruction by Christians early in the fourth century is attested by the Syrian writer Zenob. He mentions the existence of Hindu temples built by an Indian colony settled in the canton of Taron to the west of lake Van as early as the second century B.C., about A.D. 304 St. Gregory appeared before these temples, and in spite of heroic defence by the Indians, he defeated them and broke the two images of gods which were 12 and 15 cubits high.9a Akbar was quite justified in putting Christianity in the same class with orthodox Islam for its intolerance.

Typical in some ways of the Byzantine trade by sea was the ‘Crotchety Monk’ Cosmas Indikopleustes (the man who sailed to India), who was a merchant in his early days and whose business seems to have taken him to many places on the Persian Gulf, on the west coast of India and as far east as Ceylon, though some doubt if he visited India at all. He wrote in A.D. 550 a book called Christian Topography. Its main purpose was, in the words of Gibbon, ‘to confute the impious heresy of those who maintain that the earth is a globe and not a flat oblong table as is represented in the Scriptures’. He speaks of Christian churches in Ceylon, often citing a merchant

8 Ibid., pp. 139-40, ‘Roman coins found in India’, JRAS, 1904, esp. pp. 607 ff.
9 JRAS, 1904, p. 309. New History of the Indian People, VI,
9a Ibid., pp. 339-40,
Sopatros who had been to Ceylon, and in several districts on the west coast of India. He says that the bishop under whose care these Christians were, had been ordained in Persia. He was the first and the only ancient writer to enunciate the truth that beyond China on the east is the Ocean. There is nothing in the information he gives about India or Ceylon which he could not have learnt from Sopatros and other travellers.\textsuperscript{10}

Severus Sobokht, a teacher and titular bishop in a Christian monastery on the Euphrates, in one fragment of his works dated A.D. 662, says this: 'I will omit all discussion of the science of the Hindus. a people not the same as Syrians (he was defending Syrians against Greek arrogance); their subtle discoveries in this science of astronomy, discoveries that are more ingenious than those of the Greeks and the Babylonians; their valuable methods of calculation; and their computing that surpasses description. I wish only to say that this computation is done by nine signs. If those who believe, because they speak Greek, that they have reached the limits of science should know these things they would be convinced that there are also others who know something.'\textsuperscript{11}

The Christian bishop is doubtless referring to the principle of the place value of the first nine numbers which together with the use of the zero considerably simplified arithmetical calculations. Ārvabhāṭṭa mentions the system in his Āryabhaṭīya and applies it to the extraction of square and cube roots. He was well posted in the contemporary Greek astronomy of Alexandria and in the work and methods of his predecessors in India, but reached independent conclusions from his own researchers. He gave a value for \( \pi \) more accurate than any suggested before, and his work registered similar progress in Algebra and Trigonometry. India did indeed owe something to Greece in astronomy as in some other sciences and arts; but as Sobokht pointed out, it was by no means a one-way traffic.

The rise and rapid progress of Islam in the seventh and eighth centuries drew the East and West much closer than any force had yet done, and opened out numerous channels of intercourse, both material and spiritual. Travel and trade increased when the first shocks of war subsided, and we possess a more complete record of the transactions of the age, thanks to the writings of Arab travellers, geographers and historians. The early Arab geographers gained from India the notion that there was a world centre which they styled \textit{arab}, a corruption of the name of the Indian town Ujjaini where there was an astronomical observatory and on the meridian of which the


'world Cupola' or 'Summit' was supposed to be. Abul Kasim Ubaidullah bin Abdullah, better known as Ibn Khurdadhbih, was one of the earliest of these Arab writers. His ancestors had been Magians of Persian descent before they embraced Islam. He was Director of Post and Intelligence service in Media and initiated road books and itineraries with his Kitab al-Masalik Wal Mamlak (Book of Routes and Kingdoms) first published in A.D. 846, but revised subsequently till at least 885. Abu 'Ali Ahmad, better known as Ibn Rustihi, also of Persian origin (c A.D. 903), compiled a work called Ah-a 'Lak al-Nafisah (Precious bags of travelling provisions); Abu Bakr bin Muhammad, better known as Ibn Al-Fakih al-Hamdani composed in the same year his Kitab-al Buldan (Book of Countries), a comprehensive geography often cited by al-Masudi and Yakut. About 950 Abu Ishak Ibrahim, better known as al-Istakhi produced his Masalik Wal-Mamlak (Routes and Kingdoms) with coloured maps for each country. At his request Ibn Hawkal (943-977), who travelled as far as Spain revised the maps and text of his geography; he later rewrote the whole book and issued it under his own name. Abu-al-Hasan Ali bin Husain, known as al-Masudi, 'the Herodotus of the Arabs' followed the topical method instead of the dynastic in his history. His Muruj al-Dhahabwa Ma'adin al-Jawhar (Meadows of Gold and Mines of Gems) brought down to 947, was a Cyclopaedia of history and geography. Abu Zaid Hassan Sirafi of the Persian gulf, no great traveller himself, met many well travelled merchants and scholars, including the celebrated Masudi, and edited and earlier work Silsilat al-Tawarikh, on India and China by adding to it data from his own studies and talks. His predecessor, Arram bin al-Asbaj as-Sulami, who wrote his work (Kitab Asma 'Ilbar) (Tihamah wa Makaniba), in A.D. 851 has often been identified, though wrongly, with merchant Sulaiman, who seems to have been only one of the several authorities relied on by that writer; Abu Zaid's revision was made in A.D. 916.

After this brief notice of the principal sources of information on this interesting period, we may proceed to notice the details of the intercourse, material and spiritual, and give an indication of their cultural effects. In the seventh century bamboo was imported from India to al-Khatt, the coast of al-Bahrain, for the shafts of lances. The best swords also came from India, whence their name hindu. From the fall of Rome, the Red Sea and Persian Gulf trade was run

13 Ibid., pp. 384-385.
14 Ibid., p. 391.
15 E. A. N. Sastri, Foreign Notes of South India, Madras, 1939, pp. 21-2.
16 Hitti, op. cit., p. 173.
solely by Arabs and Indians for many centuries. According to Hamza of Isfahan and Masudi, from the fifth century A.D. the ships of India and Ceylon were constantly to be seen moored as high up the Euphrates as Hira, near Kufa, a city some forty-five miles to the S. W. of ancient Babylon. There was a gradual recession in the headquarters of the Indian and Chinese trade. From Hira it descended to Obulla, the ancient Apologos; from Obulla, it was transferred to Basra, a neighbouring city; from Basra to Siraf on the northern side of the Persian Gulf, and thence to Kish and Hormuz.17

The partial success of Muhammad bin Kasim in annexing Sind to the Arab empire early in the eighth century brought Indian thought well within the horizon of Islam and helped to produce a steady Indian influence on the Islamic world. Wandering Indian monks were a factor of practical importance as early as the age of the Abbasid caliphs of Baghdad. Jahiz (d. A.D. 866) pictures them very graphically and calls them Zindig monks. One of these monks preferred to bring suspicion of theft on himself and endure maltreatment rather than betray a thieving bird, because he did not wish to be the cause of the death of living being. They were either Sadhus or Bhikshus, or those who followed their methods and example.18 Buddhist works were translated into Arabic under the Abbasid Caliphs Mansur (A.D. 754-775) and Harun (775-809) from Persian or Pahlavi or directly from Sanskrit. Among them were Balaiyar wa Budasa (Barlaam and Josaphat, being the story of the conversion of an Indian prince Josaphat, Buddha, by the ascetic Barlaam), and a Budd-book. And there was much direct contact, with Buddhist monasteries flourishing in Balkh, the Naubehar for instance, long before the definitive Muslim conquest of India in the twelfth century. Generally speaking several lines of Indian influence have been traced in Islam as the result of the early contacts between Islam and Hinduism in Sindh and outside India. First, in the sphere of secular popular literature, many a deliverance of ethical and political wisdom in the dress of proverbs, was taken over from the fables of India such as the Tales of the Panchatantra. The earliest literary work in Arabic that has come down to us is Kalifah wa Dimnah (Fables of Bidpai), a translation from Pahlavi (Middle Persian) which was itself a rendering from Sanskrit. The original work was brought to Persia from India, together with the game of chess in the reign of Anovshirwan (531-79). What gives the Arabic version special significance is the fact that the Persian was lost, as also the Sanskrit original, though the material


18 Titus, Indian Islam, London, 1930, citing Goldziher and other authorities, is followed in the whole of this paragraph unless otherwise indicated.
in an expanded form is still found in the Panchatantra. The Arabic version became the basis of all existing translations into some forty languages including, besides European tongues, Hebrew, Turkish, Ethiopic, Icelandic and Malay. This book, intended to instruct princes in the laws of politiy by means of animal fables, was done into Arabic by ibn-al-Muqaffa', a Zoroastrian convert to Islam whose suspect orthodoxy brought about his death by fire (c. A.D. 757). Secondly, in the field of science, in mathematics, astronomy and astrology, and in medicine and magic, the secular wisdom of Islam was largely indebted to India. About 773 an Indian traveller introduced into Baghdad a treatise on astronomy, a Siddhanta (Al-Sindhinda) which by order of al-Mansur was translated by Muhammad ibn-Ibrahim al-Fazari who subsequently became the first astronomer in Islam; the translation was made between 796 and 803 with the aid of Indian scholars. The famous al-Khwarizmi (c. 850) based his widely known astronomical tables (Nij) on al-Fazari's work, and syncrctized the Indian and Greek systems of astronomy, adding his own contribution at the same time. The same Indian traveller has also brought a treatise on mathematics by means of which the numerals, called in Europe Arabic and by Arabs Indian (Hindi), entered the Muslim world. Thirdly, there was a good deal of influence in the distinctly religious sphere, though this was largely confined to the development of Sufism. Abu'l 'Atahiya (A.D. 748-825) was well aware of the doctrine of Zuhd (Asceticism) and hailed, as an example of a highly honoured man, the king in the garments of a beggar. Goldziher thinks this is in fact an image of the Buddha; that may or may not be, but there is little reason to doubt the influence here of the thought, the religious imagery of expression, and pious practices from both Buddhist and Vedantic sources. A Persian, Bayazid al-Bustami (875), whose grandfather was a Magian, probably introduced the doctrine of fana, or absorption in the personality of God. Another Persian, al-Hallaj (the carder) was in 922 flogged, exposed on a gibbet, then decapitated and burned by the Abbasid inquisition for having declared Ana al-Hagis (I am the Truth), i.e. God. His 'crucifixion' made him the great Sufi martyr. His mystic theory is made clear in these verses quoted in his biography:

I am He whom I love, and He whom I love is I
We are two souls dwelling in one body.
When thou seest me, thou seest Him;
And when thou seest Him, thou seest us both'.

Al-Hallaj's tomb in west Baghdad stands still as that of a saint.20

19 Hitti, op. cit., p. 308.
20 Ibid., pp. 435-46.
The religious practices of Sufi communities comprise ethical self-
culture, ascetic meditation and intellectual abstraction much like
Yoga, including kinesis and ecstasy. The Sufis were responsible for
the diffusion of the rosary (subhah) among Muslims. Of Hindu origin,
this instrument of devotion was probably borrowed by the Sufis from
the eastern Christian churches, and not directly from India; it is first
mentioned in Arabic literature about A.D. 810.\textsuperscript{21}

The shadow play had its origin in India and thence spread to the
neighbouring countries to the east and west, and the Muslims got
it from India direct or by way of Persia.\textsuperscript{22} Indian craftsmen were
employed in building the mosque of al-Walid (Ummayyad) at Da-
mascus early in the eighth century A.D.\textsuperscript{23} The Great mosque of Sa-
marrá (A.D. 850) built at a cost of 700,000 dinars was rectangular and
the multifoil arches of the windows suggest Indian influence.\textsuperscript{24} Short-
ly before the middle of the tenth century, the first draft of what later
became \textit{Alf Laylah wa-laylah} (A Thousand and One Nights) was made
in al-Irak. The basis of this draft prepared by al-Jashiyari (942)
was an old Persian work \textit{Hazar Afsan} (Thousand Tales) containing
several stories of Indian origin.\textsuperscript{25}

Many terms of musical terminology in Arabic are of Indian ori-
gin.\textsuperscript{26} Abu-al-'Ala al-Ma'Orri (973-1057) of Northern Syria, 'phi-
losopher of poets and poet of philosophers', went to Baghdad in 1009
and became inoculated with the ideas of Ikhwan-al-Safa and others of
Indian origin. The former was an eclectic school of popular philo-
sophy with leanings towards Pythagorean speculations, its name
meaning 'the brethren of sincerity'. The appellation is presumably
taken from the story of the ringdove in \textit{Kahlah wa-Dimnah} in which
it is related that a group of animals by acting as faithful friends
(Ikhwan-al-Safa) to one another escaped the shares of the hunter.
The school had their centre in al-Basrah and a branch in Baghdad.
On his return home al-Ma'arri adopted a vegetarian diet and a life
of comparative seclusion. His later works, particularly his \textit{Luzumiy-
yat} and \textit{Risalat-al-Ghufran} (Treatise on Foreigners) reveal him as one
who took reason for his guide and pessimistic scepticism for his phi-
losophy. It was this \textit{Risalah} that is claimed to have exercised a
determining influence over Dante in his \textit{Divine Comedy}.\textsuperscript{27} As is
well known, the illustrious Al-Biruni (Alberuni), a Shiite with agnost-
tic leanings, stayed in India at the beginning of the eleventh century,

\textsuperscript{21} ibid., p. 438.
\textsuperscript{22} ibid., p. 690.
\textsuperscript{23} ibid., p. 285.
\textsuperscript{24} ibid., p. 417.
\textsuperscript{25} ibid., p. 428.
\textsuperscript{26} ibid., 428.
\textsuperscript{27} ibid., pp. 372 and 459.
was charmed by Hindu science and philosophy, and did his best to make it better known in the Muslim world.

On the state of trade between Europe and Asia in the ninth century A.D. there is a precious passage in Ibn Khurdadhbih which is worth reproducing. The Jewish merchants speak Persian, Roman (Greek and Latin), Arabic and the French, Spanish and Slav languages. They travel from the West to the East, and from the East to the West, now by land and now by sea. They take from the West eunuchs, female slaves, boys, silk, furs, and swords. They embark in the country of the Franks on the Western sea and sail to Farama; there they put their merchandise on the backs of animals and go by land marching for five days to Colzom, at a distance of twenty parasangs. Then they embark on the Eastern Sea (Red Sea) and go from Colzom to Hedjaz and Jidda; and then to Sind, India and China. On their return they bring musk, aloes, camphor, cinnamon and other products of the eastern countries, and return to Colzom and then to Farama where they take ship again on the Western Sea, some going to Constantinople to sell their goods, and others to the country of the Franks. Sometimes the Jewish merchants, in embarking on the Western Sea, sail (to the mouth of the Oronte) towards Antioch. At the end of three days’ march (from there), they reach the banks of the Euphrates and come to Baghdad. There they embark on the Tigris and descend to Obullah, whence they sail to Oman, Sind, India and China. The voyage is thus made without interruption. In fact, it is only with the establishment of the Muslim empire that the Persian Gulf, which had experienced some revival under the Sassanians, come fully into its own as the main channel of trade. The importance of Obullah (Ubullah) dates from the Sassanian times or even earlier; the Muslims gathered there ‘such a quantity of booty as had never before been seen’. Ibn Khurdadhbih also mentions galangal (galangale) and kamala, besides porcelain, sugar-cane, pepper, cassia, silk and musk as articles imported from the east. Masudi, who visited India about A.D. 916, mentions nutmegs, cloves, camphor, arecanuts, sandalwood and aloes wood as products of the Indian Archipelago. Edrisi (A.D. 1099-1186) of Sicily also mentions porcelain, the fine cotton fabrics of the Coromandel, the pepper and cardamoms of Malabar, the camphor of Sumatra, nutmegs, the lemons of the Mihran (Indus), the asafaotide of Afghanistan, and cubebas as an import of Aden. He names Konkan as the country of ‘saj’, i.e. of the sag or teak tree.

28 Foreign Notices, p. 21.
30 Ibid., p. 66.