

The Soomras of Sindh: their origin, main characteristics and rule.

– an overview (general survey) (1025 – 1351 AD)

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1. Introduction:

Soomra is a prominent historical race, but the available historical studies on Sindh are bereft of its history in full detail and continuum. The history of Sindh has many a vacuum, which have to be bridged. Historically, Soomras are the first to wrest Sindh from the Arab rule (712 – 1025 AD). They substituted the Arab Habari government of al-Mansurah (875 – 1025 AD) after the episode of Sultan Mahmud Ghaznavi's sack of al-Mansurah and unsuccessful hold over Sindh. Following the historical method, Soomras should be studied along with the rest of the races and tribes that inhabited Sindh and the events that occurred in the eleventh century AD: They were the Sama, Sehta, Abra, Sodha, Channa, Panhwar, Pahore, Gujar, Bhatti, Jarija (Sama) Thahim, Gaha, Taur, Baran, Juneja (Sama), Rajar, Rajpar, Kachhela and the rest, who supported Soomras in their historical struggle to establish a local rule in Sindh. They were settled on their farmlands from Mirpur Mathelo to Wagah Kot and further into the Kutch-Bhuj. Internally independent, they paid the tribute and supplied levies to the Soomra government. Besides the Soomra hold, the Jat and Malah tribesmen were also strong enough to challenge the Ghaznavid boats on the Indus in 1027-28 AD). The Soomras led the national resistance against foreign occupation and rule.

2. The origin of Soomra race:

Writers differ on the origin of the Soomra race: Whether they are ethnic indigenous Sindhis, a Rajput racial stock, or an Arab race? Historians draw conclusion from socio-cultural as well as the historical and archaeological evidence. The way in which the history of Sindh has been recorded in the past, does not admit of the historical method. However, according to the available printed material, Mir Tahir Muhammad Nisyani, in his Tarikh Tahiri (1621

AD) asserts that Soomras were originally Hindus.¹ They converted to Islam but remained Hindu in their customs, dress and even in their names. Tarikh Waqa'i Rajisthan corroborates this viewpoint and confirms that Soomras were originally "Parmar Rajputs". They are mentioned as Qarmati, by Hamdani Abbas in his article published in Darul Ma'arif, Cairo. However, according to a local researcher, Maulai Shedai, Soomras were Parmar Rajputs, and amongst them, Amrah Soomro was the first to accept Islam. Again, however, from Bashari Maqdisi, Al Beruni, and the Cambridge History of India (Vol. II), we note that it was during the Soomra rule (1025 – 1351 AD) that the "Rajput" migrated from India to Sindh.² Dr. N. A. Baloch, the eminent modern scholar of Sindh has written an exhaustive book on the Soomra Period, in which the conflicting versions about the origin of the Soomra race are reconciled: a hybrid race of Sindhi-Arab blood, that emerged after the Ummayyad caliph Sulaiman bin Abdul Malik (715-17 AD)'s decree asking Arab officers posted in Sindh to settle in the land permanently. Consequently they took Sindhi wives and subsequently married their daughters in Sindhi families. Hence, Dr. Baloch writes that "Soomras were descendents of these hybrid princes, whose ancestors, according to common legend, were either Arabs or their grand-sons on the mothers' side".³ The evidence, if a common legend can provide one, is nonetheless tilted towards the Arab origin. It is also suggested that the name Soomra is a corrupt form of the Arabic name Samarrai i.e. the inhabitants of Samarra, a town built by the Abbasid Caliph Al-Mu'tasim (r. 833 – 842 AD) in 836 AD and named سرّاه من الرا Sarrah man ra'a, i.e. pleased in he who sees it.⁴ It remained the capital for 56 years (836 – 892 AD). It is argued that after the decline of Samarra, some of its Arab inhabitants migrated to Sindh and settled there for good. Habaris were then ruling in Sindh. By all norms of historical identification, the Soomra race appears to be an ancient indigenous race of Sindh. The Sumerians of Babylonian civilisation could be their ancestors. A modern writer laments that archaeological findings are discussed, but "none of the scholars has tried to link the living traditions of the living Sumras (Soomras) with the dead history of the dead Sumerians".⁵ The history of Sindh will fold in to bridge its gaps if research is conducted by a realistic approach.

3. The Soomra rule:

In the year 1025 AD, "Soomras assembled at Tharee in taluka Matli of the present Badin district, and raised their Chief (Sardar) Soomro by name to be ruler of Sindh".⁶ Mir Ma`sum mentions nine rulers, Armel Soomro being the last one. But, Hamir son of Dodo-V is considered by consensus to be the last ruler of Soomro Dynasty, on the authority of letters of Ainul Mulk Mahru, the then governor of Multan (1352 – 1365 AD).⁷

3. (b). Succession – list:

- 1). Sardar Soomar, ruled at Tharee (1025 – 1030 AD).
- 2). Ibn Soomar Rajpal, Dodo-I ruled up to Uch (1030 – 1054 AD), died issueless.
- 3). Bhoongar-I, son of Khafif (the last ruler of Mansurah, 1011 – 1026) ruled for 14 years (1054 1068 AD).
- 4). Dodo-II, abdicated after 20 years' rule (1068 – 1089 AD) and his minor son, Sanghar was raised to the throne under the regency of his elder sister Tari.
- 5). Tari ruled for 3 years (1089 – 1092 AD), till Sanghar came of age.
- 6). Sanghar ruled independently for 15 years (1092 – 1107 AD). He is mentioned in the Antiquities of Kutch & Kathiawar as having "directed his efforts against.....Kutch and extended his sway... (to) Manik Bai".⁸ He died issueless, and his Gujar wife Hamoon occupied the throne with the help of her brother Phattoo, but the Soomra nobles crushed the conspiracy and raised a son of Dodo-II to the throne.
- 7). Khafif-II, son of Dodo-II ruled for 36 years (1107 – 1142 AD), and annexed a part of Kutch territory with Sindh.
- 8). Umar-I (1142 – 1181 AD): After his rule Ghorid invasion of Sindh occurred; and during his rule, Phattoo Soomro, the ruler of Nagarparkar, occupied the entire Kutch territory (1178 AD), for some time, which was retrieved by Samas.
- 9). Dodo-III (1181 – 1195 AD). He contended with the Ghorid occupation of Debal and also attacked the Samas of Kutch. The Ghorid rule was made impossible, and Jam Lakho Samo submitted and was pardoned for his designs on Thatta.

- 10). Bhoongar-II (1195 – 1226 AD): During his rule Sultan Jalaluddin Khwarizm Shah wrought destruction in Sindh and occupied Debal, where Chanesar Soomro was ruling. He fled and returned to re-occupy Debal.⁹
- 11). Ganhwar (1226 – 1242 AD)
- 12). Muhammad Toor (1242 – 1251 AD)
- 13). Amrah Soomro (1251 – 1256 AD)

No historical record is available for these rulers except that Amrah Soomro is mentioned as the builder of a new capital, Muhammad (Mahatam) Toor and the one who established a regular Soomra rule all over Sindh.¹⁰ The subsequent history is blank on the rule of the rest of the identified Soomra rulers, as under:-

- 14). Ganhwar-II (1256 – 1259 AD)
- 15). Dodo-IV (1259 – 1273 AD)
- 16). Tai (1273 – 1296 AD)
- 17). Chanesar (1296 – 1300 AD)
- 18). Bhoongar-III (1301 – 1315 AD)
- 19). Khafif-III (1315 – 1333 AD)
- 20). Dodo-V, Umar-II, Bhoongar-IV and Hamir, son of Dodo-V (1333 – 1351 AD)
- 21). Hamir in exile (1351 – 1355 AD)

The Kingdom of Umarkot:

Hamir Soomro continued Soomra rule in Thar. His son Umar ruled at Umarkot (1355 – 1390 AD). Bhoongar-V succeeded him (1390 – 1400 AD); and Hamir-II ruled for 40 years more (1400 1440 AD).

4. The Soomra traditions and the main characteristics of their rule:

- a) The Rajput tradition of killing womenfolk before being killed on the battlefield is also visible in the existent history of the Soomras as evinced in Dastan Dodo-Chanesar.
- b) The ancient Sindhi tradition of Saam (protection) was in vogue. The following contemporary evidence exists. Abro, the protector of Soomra womenfolk in Dastan Dodo-Chanesar, says:

”سِرَ سِينِ آهِنِم سُومِرِيُون، جِي سِرِثِيُون ٿِيَان سِي،
سُورج سَنُونِ نِه اِپِرِي، تَرْتِي تَاجُ نِه ٿِي.“¹²

- i.e. The Soomra womenfolk are with me till I live.
If I deliver these kite like women (to the enemy),
The Sun will not rise straight,
The earth will not give yield.
- c). The most prominent historical tradition of Soomras is their power of resistance against an alien rule; and their ability to unite Sindhi tribes in the face of such instance: The Ghaznavid occupation and rule was thwarted by the continued warriors of Soomra, Jat and Med (Mohana) tribes. Soomras secured independence of Sindh for over 125 years (1051 – 1176 AD) by their military prowess and ability to maintain national unity. The Ghorid invasion and occupation of Debal in 1176 was made short lived. Another 75 years of Sindh history (1176 – 1251 AD) shows Soomras maintaining national leadership and ultimate establishment of their rule over Sindh on firm footing.
- d). Religious, educational, cultural and literary development: For sure the Soomra government facilitated public preaching of Islam; and also maintained religious harmony. The evidence of Ismaili dais cordial relations with Sunni Sufis is well established. The Soomra rule is also credited with promotion and development of Sindhi language and culture. It was made the medium of instruction (education) and poetry. A superb piece of poetry pertaining to Soomra period has survived: A poetess, who called herself Salkah Majzobah composed the following couplet:

”وَسِينِ تَانِ وَسُ، عَالِمِ لَڳَوَئِي آسِرِي،
هَاتِي كِيَمَ تَرَسُ، جُو مُنْدُونِ مَوَئِي آئِيُون“¹³

- i.e. If you like to rain, let you,

people believe your promise,
Do not wait now,
The seasons have returned.

Apart from the poetic excellence, the quoted couplet reflects developed Sindhi linguistic status. It was the product of well-established madressahs having Sindhi medium of instruction. The Soomra madressahs at Agham Kot, Mahatam Toor and village Jinhan Soomro were veritable seats of learning. On Bakhar island in the Indus, Shaikh Nooh Bakhri (1144 – 1235 AD) managed a Suhrwardi Sufi Khanqah and madressah.¹⁴ Sehwan Madressah Fuq`hai Islam had Makhdoom Usman Marwandi (1162 – 1274 AD) on its faculty. He authored five books for the madressah curriculum, which remained in use centuries afterwards till the British occupation of Sindh in 1843 AD. The titles only are now left with us, which are (i) Mizan-i-Sarf, (ii) Ajnas, (iii) Qism-i-Doyam, (iv) Aqd, and (v) Zubdat. The survived the demise of Makhdoom Usman Marwandi, alias Hazrat Qalandar Lal Shahbaz (d. 1274 AD). It was managed by Muslim philanthropists and educators named Makhdoom Noorullah, Shah Abdullah and Abdur Rahman. Egyptian students were reportedly on the rolls of Madressah Fuqhai Islam Sehwan Sharif. Ibn Batuta stayed at this madressah during his sojourn in Sehwan (Sept. 1333 AD). Pir Patho (d. 1248 AD) and Shah Jameel Dataar Girnari (1185 – 1244 AD) preached Islam in Thatta region. The missionaries of Islam abounded in Sindh. Only some names have come down in history e.g. Pir Haji Ismail Panhwar of Pat (d. 1196 AD) and his assistant Pir Bhirkyo (d. 1200 AD), the four sons of Shah Dataar viz. Shah Hassan, Shah Goriya, Shah Aari and Shah Lal Chhato, and other missionaries like Shah Wajihuddin son of Syed Fateh Shah, Shaikh Zakarya (who is buried at Dando (Badin district), Karim Qitaal Giryra etc. There were many devoted Islamic missionaries in Sindh during the Soomra rule, who were patronised and provided security. Thus Islam spread by leaps and bounds, during this period, to make Sindh a Muslim majority land for good.¹⁵

5. Notes, references and bibliography:

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CAN BANBHORE EXCAVATION, PUT SOME LIGHT ON SOOMRA PERIOD POTTERY TRADE?

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Banbhore is located some 40 miles east of Karachi, Pakistan and is an easily accessible site by National Highway.

The site was examined early in 20th century by Henry Cousens and N.G. Majumdar of *Indian Archaeological Survey*; later Mr. Leslie Alcock did some earlier excavations in 1951, for the newly created *Department of Archaeology of Pakistan*. Substantive excavations began in 1958 and continued till 1966, revealing a plan of a well fortified harbor town.

Three distinctive periods were reported: the Scytho-Pathian, Hindu-Buddhists, and Islamic; dateable from 1st century BC to 13th century AC [Pak. Archaeology #1, p50]. According to the excavators main portion of the site showed a long period of occupation from the eighth to the thirteenth century CE. The earliest phase was assigned to the Umayyad period. The second phase to the Abbasid period (ninth to tenth centuries), associated with a variety of slip painted glazed wares, and also imported celadon, and stone-paste ware. The following third phase continued 'to the beginning of the 13th century. The last phase brings us towards the middle of thirteenth century, that was marked up with some great upheaval, half of the town looked abandoned [Ibid.p 50-1]

The brief progress reports out of the long drawn excavations were revised three times. These simply tried to low the line, historical records have created. No plausible evidence came about the identification of the place, but excavators presumed as if they were dealing with the historical town of Daibal, that was stormed by invading Arab armies in the year 711 CE.

The Excavators did not publish the details of excavations, nor the notes; site excavation diaries and other such related material is also not available for studies.

The problem gets compounded as the other contemporary sites which though have been excavated, such as Mansura, Lahore and Sehwan but no studies, of the material have been published, nor the relevant material available for reference/studies.

It is also a fact that many contemporary sites, promising interesting and relevant information are yet to be excavated, such as Arror, Nirun, Mahfuza, Multan, Nasirpur, Aghamkot, etc. etc.

However limited scope of the material, and brief accounts available to us offer at least something to start the probe. In the Islamic period four distinct phases were reported, corresponding with four building periods of the defence wall. The earliest phase was assigned on the bases of the ceramics, i.e the Umayyad period. The citadel according to the reports, owes its origin to this period. The second phase corresponded with the major repairs to the defense walls, that is assigned to Abbasids', covering the ninth-tenth centuries CE. It is associated with 'the various slip painted glazed wares, along with the imported Chinese celadon, porcelain, and stone wares'. Third phase continued to the beginning of the thirteenth century CE, it corresponds with the rebuilding of the defense wall of the citadel on the reduced scale. "This period is distinguished by the introduction of sgraffiato glazed wares, which almost totally replaced other types of pottery".

The excavators reported the turquoise/blue glazed thick jars coming from the Islamic levels. Though such heavy glazed Parthian/Sasanian jars have been common occurrence, in many pre-Islamic contexts, all around the region.

The molded pottery and their moulds have been assigned the pre-Islamic time frame, by the excavators, though these type of moulds have been found in the relative sites and are also found in exclusive Muslim periods, such as at Nishapur.

The scientific analysis has given some good points of focus, but the data is so small that it can hardly help the students of the Islamic pottery in finding the answers to most crucial questions. The advances in the polychrome glazed wares were studied by exposing the shards to the investigation by examination through 'analytical scanning electron microscope', the results suggested that the technique of true under glaze decoration' without the slip was first developed in Syria. Whereas the short lived over glazed painting originated in Iran [Mason et al(2001)pp.191-209]. In another study it was enquired through the physico-chemical analyses of the Kairouan luster tiles and the luster pottery of Iraq the possible place of production, the results suggest that most probably both the types came from either Baghdad, Samarra or Basra [bobbin, et al (2003) pp.569-577] In another study through the Instrumental neutron activation analyses (INAA), and Laser-ablation inductively-coupled-plasma mass spectroscopy (LA-ICP-MS), pot shards from various sites in the Deh Luran (Iran) were examined in association with the shards of known provenance of Parthian and Islamic periods. The results suggested that the alkaline based glazes and the alkaline-low-lead, and lead based glazes were applied on the body paste which were different from each other [Hill, et al (2004)pp.585-605]. Yet another study was carried out by analyzing the Lead Isotope of the glazes of Islamic pottery from Fustat. The results tell that the source of the lead used for the glazing purpose was very well away from home [Wif et al (2003)pp.405-420]. In forthcoming study the dates were obtained from glazed rim shards, by optically stimulated luminescence (OSL) [Hill, in preparation].

The time frame involved in our enquiry is the most volatile as far as the political upheavals are concerned, the weak Caliphate was just ceremonial; the provinces were assuming their own roles, and were busy in fighting with each other, in order to expand their area of influence, through military conquests, the economy was affected due to perpetual movement of troops, prolonged sieges. The utilization of sectarian feelings against the political

opponents was the call of the day. In such circumstances one can not clearly see whether the crafts of particular area were affected, and if it did, then to what extent? Was the effect forceful enough to cause the discontinuation of any of the particular form or type of the elite ceramics?

The Caliphate when went weak it really affected the capital Baghdad to lose its leading role as the cultural leader. The focus then moved eastwards.

The political boundaries certainly over-lapped the cultural boundaries, obviously with the inception of Arab armies the onslaught of alien culture was expected, but that did not actually happen. It was to happen subsequently that the larger areas were just divided and provinces/regions started claiming sovereignties, the political boundaries were over lapping larger cultural entities. This paved way for coming into being of a cosmopolitan cultural value, which every body loved to adhere, princes vied with each other to bring the best of intellectuals and master craftsmen to their courts. The capital cities produced a sort of common styles, and share values. The outskirts were left to the practices of their regional craftsmen, and at times their styles, if they were not producing the copies.

In this scenario it really becomes difficult to tell which of the major types were restricted to one spot, or were being produced at more than one spot. The proceeds of excavations revealed an extensive trade that was carried out from this port town. It indicated at a rich consumer urban culture where the luxury items were much in circulation.

No doubt that the period well co-incides with the huge Indian Ocean trade, that flourished due to suitable monsoon winds, that facilitated seasonal 'to and fro' seafaring easy to this port.

The range of the trade as revealed through the archaeological investigations, carried out at many stations in this vast region, testify that the farther limits of *Mediterranean and the reaches of China were being covered*, by the crafty seafarers who caused establishment of rich trade network.

The ports most known during this time are from the northern tip of Africa, such as *Berinke*, linked with the versatile port of *Kana* of Yeman, *Suher* in Oman, *Siraf* in Iran, *Banbhore* in the western India, *Barygaza* further towards east, *Mantai* in Sri Lanka and *Arikamedu*, just to name few major centers, where the investigations have given concrete indications of the huge maritime activity..

The wide variety of pottery un-earthed from the site of *Banbhore* is an interesting indicator.

The question of the pottery imports during the late period at Banbhore is curiously interesting, as it brings up many new questions rather than giving any clear clue to what actually happened there.

The types generally associated with the 12th century, and also the 13th centuries are conspicuously missing from the material un-earthed from Banbhore. There is hardly any explanation available to us in the written sources,, as far as the south Asian destinations are concerned. With regard to the Daibal there too is not much help forthcoming, the only explanation that may be offered is that these were the centuries when the port town was facing difficult days.

Is it related to some geographical circumstances, which were responsible for the decline in trade or it had something to do with the economic difficulties?

The regional disturbances however were really great, and there is no doubt that this may possibly be assigned some real importance while considering these issues.

However it is very surprising that the town of *Banbhore* does not show any typology that is related to the pottery produced during the later half of the 12th century, either in Iran or in Syria/Iraq.

This fact may either denote that the town of *Banbhore* either had ceased to exist, or it had no trade link with these areas, from where it previously imported huge amounts of luxury pottery.

In this back drop we revert back to our initial question whether the evidence provided to us through

excavated pottery from *Banbhore* can lead us to conclude something about the Soomra period trade links?

The wide variety of glazed pottery un-earthed at *Banbhore* can be generally listed as under :

The heavy green/blue glazed large jars

The opaque ware

celadon and stone paste

Lustre ware

slip painted ware

splashed pottery

Sgraffiato

splashed Sgraffiato

It is true that the heavy green blue large jars have been previously considered to be of Sasanid origin, but Burkley tests of *Siraf* shards have shown these to belong to 8th – 9th centuries. Similar material too is related to Samarra context. *Opaque ware* is from 9th – as well as from 10th century. We have with us many Chinese *celadon* and *stone paste* pottery. It is from 9th & 10th centuries. Much of *lustre ware* is from 9th century.

The later period Persian Lustre is quite interestingly missing from Banbhore.

Slip painted variety from Central Asia of 10th century is in abundance, some is true about Nishapuri Slip painted ware of 10th and 11th century.

The Sgraffiato, though wrongly ascribed to 13th century by the excavators, is in abundance. There is no doubt that this type of pottery available in Samarra context, came into production quite earlier contrary to the contentions of excavators of Banbhore.

The 10th century Nishapuri Sgraffiato is hugely available at *Banbhore*; similarly the 11th century material too has also been excavated.

The pottery which was produced in 12th century, such as *over-glaze painted* pottery, in Persia is totally missing from Banbhore.

No such piece was reported by the excavators, nor was it found during the research studies of the excavated material, in the stores at site.

Similarly the later day Iranian lustre is missing. There is one curious fact that needs explanation. Most of the Sgraffiato, and opaque ware, and also some of the *slip painted ware* vessels have shown signs of repairs.

Strange indeed it is, but it is not rare. In the Indian Ocean trade region we have some such instances.

How we can explain this ?

The pottery evidence suggest that till the 11th century *Banbhore* flourished in trade. In the 12th century some unknown restrictions on the trade seems to have been applied. Whether it had got some thing to do with the economic variations, or to the considerable fall in maritime trade, or still further had got something to do with the political scene, which handicapped the society, and de-capitated it, resulting end in foreign trade in 12th century.

Further explanations may be found in the political changes which occurred. This was the time when Khuwarzam Shah and later Shahabuddin Ghouri had come down, upto the coast to sub due the Soomra Chieftains, they established their writ over the area that might had overshadowed the economic capacity of the place.

On the evidence presented by the pottery from *Banbhore*, it can be said with certainty that during 12th century Banbhore's economy took a nasty downward plunge, and the population was compelled to repair even their pottery.