The Sub-Himalayan continent is practically as vast and as varied as Europe itself. The contacts with Islam began naturally with coastal regions, gradually and with a chequered history to embrace the whole country. There are numerous dynasties to deal; different centers have come into lime light at different epochs; and there is the history of over thirteen centuries to tell. It is just to initiate in the problems, not even all, that one can attempt in an article.

First Contacts

The Arabs had contacts with India even before Islam, not only with Sind and Gujrat which lie so close to the Eastern borders of Arabia, but also with Malābār, in connection with commerce. Can’t we perceive that in the saying of the Prophet, when he had received the delegation of a Yamanite tribe and had asked: “Who are these people who look like the people of Hind?” Or when a Yamanite deputation had gone to Ctesiphon to ask for the help of Chosroes against the Abyssinian occupants, and said: “We have been invaded by crows”, the emperor asked: “Which crows, Indians or Abyssinians?” More positive evidence is furnished by Ibn al-Kalbī, who says: “Thereafter the fair of Dabā (in ‘Umnān) which is one of the two principal ports of Arabia. There come the traders of Sind, of Hind, of China, of the people of the East and West. Its fair used to open on the last day of the month of Rajab. The method of sale there was simple negotiation. (The ruler) al-Julandā ibn al-Mustakbir levied a tithe there as well as in the fair of Suhār; and in this matter he used to do like other kings in other places.”

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1 Ibn Ḥabīb, Muḥābbar, p. 265-6.
Die Welt des Islams, III
No wonder then that the relations of Islam with this neighbour began as early as the time of the second caliph, 'Umar, as we are told by Baladhuri, Qudamah ibn Ja'far and others.

I shall however not deal with the legend in Malabar, that a raja of that country embraced Islam at the observation of the fissure of moon, (that miracle attributed to the Prophet of Islam, having occurred before his migration to Madinah), travelled to Arabia to pay personal homage to the Prophet, and died in Zafar (Yaman) on his return journey. Nor even with the tombs of two companions of the Prophet, on the Eastern coast of South-India, Tamim al-Anṣārī in Cavelong (about 40 miles South of Madras), and 'Akkāshah at Mahmūd Bandar (Porto-Novo) further to the South. It is to remind that the tombs of the same two personalities are found in Afgānistān also, and possibly in other places likewise.

The first thing that occurs to me worthy of note is the history of the country. Pre-Islamic India did not possess it, and for that period we depend now either on legends and folklore or rare inscriptions, if not foreign works such as those of Megasthenes and the like. Since the time the Indian regions became part of the Muslim world, we are on sure and solid ground. In his “India”, al-Berūnī has even tried to preserve for us data about ancient times for which he is practically the sole source.

Early Intellectual Activity

Unlike North-Western coast, the penetration of Islam in Deccan (i.e. South India) was peaceful, and remained so for over five centuries. The proselytising zeal of Arab traders is well-known; and they frequented also in Deccan. My own family is said to have taken refuge and settled there in the time of al-Ḥajjāj ibn Yūsuf (in the first century of Hijrah) to escape insults and tyranny. In the time of Ibn Baṭṭūṭah, the members of the family were respected even by local rulers for piety and learning. Evidently many others shared the same fate, and a historian describes their first arrival: “[The persecuted Muslims] somehow or other reached different ports (of Deccan). The Hindus, seeing them of a different nationality, prevented them from landing. After long solicitude and humble petition, however, they let them settle in those ports. This was on the condition that they (the Muslims) would follow Hindu customs