

# From Saph Sindhu to the Sands of Arab: Tracing Religious and Social Transitions Since the Indus Valley Civilization

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## Abstract

*The Indian subcontinent and the Arabian Peninsula are two cradles of civilization that have experienced profound and interconnected religious and social transformations over millennia. This research paper explores the transitions from the era of the Indus Valley Civilization (IVC), also known as the Saph Sindhu or the Land of Seven Rivers, to the emergence and rise of Islam in the Arabian Peninsula. Through an interdisciplinary lens incorporating archaeology, history, sociology, and religious studies, this work examines the cultural foundations of the IVC, the Vedic transition, interactions with Mesopotamian and Arabian societies, and the dynamics of religious conversion in the Arab world. Emphasis is placed on understanding the socio-economic systems, trade networks, and religious institutions that facilitated trans-regional interactions. The spread of Islam and the conversion of various groups in Arabia are contextualized through historical, political, and theological frameworks. Further, archaeological discoveries from both regions are analyzed to trace evidence of shared cultural artifacts, maritime links, inscriptions, and religious symbols. The study concludes by reflecting on the enduring influence of these ancient exchanges on contemporary religious and cultural identities. This comprehensive approach aims to fill scholarly gaps by unearthing long-term connections between the Saph Sindhu and Arabian civilizations, demonstrating how migration, trade, belief systems, and power structures shaped the religious and social landscapes we observe today.*

**Keywords:** Saph Sindhu, Indus Valley Civilization, Vedic Transition, Religious Conversion, Arabian Peninsula, Islamic Expansion, Archaeological Evidence, Indo-Arab Trade, Cultural Exchange, Ancient Civilizations

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## INTRODUCTION

The history of civilization in South Asia, particularly in the Saph Sindhu region, marks one of the earliest and most sophisticated epochs of human societal development. The term "Saph Sindhu," translated as the "Land of Seven Rivers," historically refers to the northwestern region of the Indian subcontinent, encompassing the Indus and its tributaries. This area was the heartland of the Indus Valley Civilization (IVC), one of the world's earliest urban cultures, dating back to 3300 BCE. Parallel to this, the Arabian Peninsula, though arid and geographically distinct, housed ancient tribes and settlements that interacted intermittently with their South Asian counterparts through maritime and overland trade routes. Over millennia, both regions witnessed profound religious and social evolutions, culminating in transformative epochs such as the Vedic period in India and the rise of Islam in Arabia [1][2].

This paper explores the trajectory from the Harappan cultural complex through the Vedic-Aryan transformations and onward into broader interactions with the West Asian world, including Mesopotamian, Persian, and later Islamic influences. Through this exploration, we aim to understand not only how these societies evolved independently but also how their interactions fostered religious syncretism, trade alliances, and sociopolitical exchanges. By analyzing the economic, religious, and sociocultural elements that shaped transitions in both regions, we reveal patterns of continuity and change that stretch from the Bronze Age to the post-classical Islamic period [3][4].

A key focus of the paper is to examine how the people of the Arabian Peninsula transitioned into Islamic belief systems and how these transformations related to broader historical shifts in trade, power, and knowledge exchanges. In tracing the lineage from the Saph Sindhu civilization to Arabian societies, we draw upon archaeological discoveries, ancient textual references, trade records, and theological developments. The study also investigates how modern archaeological and epigraphic findings support hypotheses of ancient inter-regional connections [5][6].

The social institutions of both civilizations evolved to reflect prevailing religious ideologies. The Harappan society, with its structured urbanism and possibly proto-religious practices, gave way to Vedic rituals

rooted in oral traditions and symbolic cosmology. Arabia, largely tribal and polytheistic before the 7th century CE, witnessed a radical unification under the message of Islam, which not only altered religious paradigms but also recast the sociopolitical framework of the region [7][8].

Furthermore, we analyze the historical mechanics of conversion, especially during the formative centuries of Islam, and how these compare to earlier patterns of religious adaptation in the Indian subcontinent. What motivated mass conversions? What role did trade, conquest, and ideology play? These questions are essential for understanding the complex human behaviors surrounding belief systems [9][10].

In sum, this study seeks to:

Reconstruct the social and religious systems of the Sapt Sindhu and early Arab civilizations.

Trace the transitions and transformations in both regions over time.

Understand the religious conversion processes, particularly in the Arab world.

Present archaeological, epigraphic, and literary evidence of Indo-Arab connections.

Evaluate the long-term cultural legacies of these interactions.

The subsequent sections will delve into detailed literature reviews, cultural and religious analyses, socio-economic dynamics, and empirical data from archaeological research to present a comprehensive picture of this historical continuum.

## **2. Literature Review**

The religious and social transitions between the Sapt Sindhu and the Arabian Peninsula have attracted a spectrum of scholarly attention across historical, archaeological, and theological domains. The literature addressing this trans-regional trajectory can be broadly categorized into primary and secondary sources, covering various periods from prehistory to the modern era.

### **2.1. Primary Studies and Archaeological Findings**

The primary sources concerning the Sapt Sindhu region stem predominantly from archaeological excavations of the Indus Valley Civilization (IVC), which flourished around 3300 BCE to 1300 BCE. Seminal works by Marshall (1931), who directed the excavation of Mohenjo-Daro, and Wheeler (1947), who explored Harappan city planning and defensive structures, laid the foundation for understanding the IVC's urban sophistication and cultural practices. Artifacts such as terracotta figurines, the famous Pashupati seal, and fire altars uncovered in Kalibangan have been instrumental in reconstructing proto-religious beliefs in the region. Kenoyer (1998) emphasized the continuity of Harappan symbolic and ritualistic traditions into Vedic and post-Vedic practices [11][12].

In the Arabian context, archaeological surveys by Potts (1990) and Uerpmann et al. (2010) present compelling evidence of early human settlement, trade, and metallurgical advancements in the southeastern Arabian Peninsula. Excavations at Ras Al Jinz and Mleiha support theories of maritime contact between the IVC and ancient Arabia. Sumerian records referring to Meluhha (possibly the IVC) and Mesopotamian cylinder seals offer indirect yet pivotal evidence of commercial and cultural exchanges. These studies indicate that material and symbolic culture traversed between regions, reinforcing a shared legacy.

Inscriptional records form another important primary dataset. The discovery of Brahmi, Kharosthi, and Aramaic scripts in cross-cultural sites (e.g., Bahrain, Oman) demonstrates early Indo-Arab interactions. The Qaryat al-Faw and Thaj inscriptions offer a glimpse into pre-Islamic Arabian tribal societies and religious pluralism, reflecting belief systems that included idols, celestial worship, and henotheism.

### **2.2. Secondary Literature: Historical and Religious Scholarship**

Secondary literature examining religious transitions draws from disciplines such as comparative religion, cultural anthropology, and historical sociology. Romila Thapar (2002) and Irfan Habib (2003) have explored the religious fluidity and class dynamics in Vedic and post-Vedic society, emphasizing the movement from animism and nature worship to more stratified ritualistic Hinduism. Wendy Doniger's (2009) interpretation of early Hindu myths reflects deep symbolic continuities from Harappan to later Brahmanical traditions [13][14].

On the Arabian side, Patricia Crone's (1987) exploration of pre-Islamic Mecca and Muhammad's socio-economic context offers critical insight into the shifting religious identities of the Arabian tribes. Fred Donner (2010) builds on this by tracing how religious belief systems in Arabia transitioned from

polytheism and tribal cults to a unifying Islamic monotheism. He links these transformations to trade, literacy (especially the rise of Arabic script), and the Quranic narrative of Abrahamic continuity.

Bernard Lewis (2002) and Hugh Kennedy (2007) explore the expansion of Islam through military, theological, and diplomatic vectors, highlighting the interplay between political power and religious persuasion. The role of trade routes in spreading Islam, especially through the incense, spice, and silk routes, is underscored in works by Andre Wink (1990), who further connects early Arab merchants with Indian Ocean commerce involving Gujarat, Kerala, and Sindh.

### 2.3. Interregional Trade and Cultural Transmission Studies

Numerous scholars emphasize the centrality of trade in shaping religious and cultural flows between Saph Sindhu and Arabia. George Hourani (1951) underscores the pre-Islamic maritime connectivity in the Indian Ocean and the Red Sea. The book "The Indian Ocean in Antiquity" edited by Reade (1996) consolidates archaeological and textual studies highlighting Indo-Arab exchanges, including the diffusion of luxury goods, religious ideas, and social customs [15][16].

Indian merchant guilds such as the Manigramam and Nanadesi, as discussed in Burton Stein’s (1998) study on South Indian trade networks, played a key role in establishing diasporic Indian communities in the Persian Gulf, some of which persisted into the Islamic era. These communities often served as cultural bridges, transmitting religious beliefs and practices.

### 2.4. Conversion and Religious Change Studies

Conversion to Islam in the Arabian Peninsula has been extensively examined within postcolonial and Islamic studies. Richard Bulliet’s (1979) "Conversion to Islam in the Medieval Period" employs quantitative models to track conversion patterns, emphasizing slow diffusion rather than coercion. Michael Cook (2000) elaborates on theological justifications for conversion and how early Muslim scholars viewed apostasy, syncretism, and heterodoxy [17][18].

Regarding Indian subcontinent parallels, Richard Eaton (2000) focuses on religious conversion in India, suggesting that socio-political patronage and Sufi networks played a greater role than military conquest. While his focus is later (1200 CE onwards), his framework of social inclusion and regional synthesis is useful in drawing analogies to earlier Arab contexts.

### 2.5. Gaps in the Literature

Despite the wealth of literature, significant gaps remain. Most studies on the IVC focus on material culture without connecting it to transregional religious ideologies. Similarly, Arabian pre-Islamic religious systems are often viewed in isolation, lacking comparative analysis with contemporaneous South Asian beliefs. Moreover, very few works systematically analyze archaeological data from a cross-civilizational perspective that includes both Saph Sindhu and Arabian cultures [19][20].

This study attempts to bridge these gaps by integrating archaeological findings, trade documentation, religious texts, and sociological theories to provide a coherent narrative of religious and social transformation across both regions.

### 2.6. Summary and Theoretical Framework

The reviewed literature reveals the importance of: (1) archaeological continuity between the Harappan and Vedic phases, (2) sustained Indo-Arab maritime interactions, (3) fluid religious and cultural identities in both regions, and (4) multidimensional conversion processes in Arabia. By employing a comparative historical methodology and grounded theory, this research positions itself at the intersection of archaeology, comparative religion, and transregional history.

Table 1: Key Characteristics of Indus Valley vs. Early Arabian Civilizations

Characteristic	Indus Valley Civilization	Early Arabian Civilizations
Time Period	2600 BCE - 1900 BCE	3000 BCE - 600 CE
Urban Planning	Highly organized	Tribal, less urbanized
Writing System	Undeciphered script	Early Arabic, Nabatean
Religion	Proto-Dharma, nature worship	Polytheism, tribal deities
Trade	Extensive (Mesopotamia, etc.)	Regional, growing by 500 CE

Table 2: Timeline of Major Religious Transitions

Period	Region	Dominant Religion(s)	Transition Event
2600–1900 BCE	Indus Valley	Proto-Dharma/Nature cults	Decline of IVC
1500–500 BCE	NW India	Vedic Religion	Aryan Migration
100–500 CE	Arabian Peninsula	Tribal polytheism	Influence from Jews, Christians
610–750 CE	Arabia	Islam	Prophet Muhammad, Rashidun Caliphate
Post 750 CE	Wider Arabia	Sunni/Shia Islam	Umayyad & Abbasid Caliphates

Table 3: Comparative Trade Goods – Indus and Arabia

Trade Goods	Indus Valley	Arabian Peninsula
Lapis Lazuli	Exported	Imported
Cotton Textiles	Exported	Limited
Frankincense	Not found	Major export
Copper & Bronze	Produced	Imported
Pottery & Seals	Elaborate	Basic

Table 4: Religious Symbols Found in Archaeological Excavations

Symbol/Artifact	Region Found	Interpretation
Unicorn seal	Indus Valley	Possibly religious/mythological figure
Fire altars	Kalibangan, IVC	Proto-Vedic ritual practice
Crescent moon symbol	Arabia (pre-Islamic)	Moon god worship
Black Stone (Kaaba)	Mecca	Pre-Islamic idol, recontextualized
Inscriptions of Allah	Post-610 CE Arabia	Rise of monotheism

Table 5: Societal Structures – A Comparative View

Aspect	Indus Society	Pre-Islamic Arab Society	Islamic Era Arab Society
Governance	Possibly centralized	Tribal chieftains	Caliphate/Theocracy
Social Stratification	Some hierarchy	Tribe and clan-based	Religious-legal hierarchy
Role of Women	Some independence	Varies by tribe	Restricted under Sharia
Legal System	Unknown	Tribal codes	Islamic jurisprudence
Education	Limited evidence	Oral traditions	Religious schools (Madrassa)

### 3. Religious Beliefs and Transitions

The spiritual beliefs of the Indus Valley Civilization remain partially obscured due to undeciphered scripts, but archaeological findings such as the Pashupati seal and fire altars suggest a proto-Dharmic tradition with early yogic, animist, and fertility worship elements. As the Indo-Aryans entered the subcontinent, the Vedic religion emerged, centered on fire sacrifices (yajnas), cosmic deities like Indra and Agni, and the authority of the Brahmanas.

Meanwhile, pre-Islamic Arabia housed polytheistic beliefs, tribal deities, animistic practices, and elements of monotheism influenced by Jewish, Christian, and Zoroastrian communities. The rise of Islam in the 7th century CE marked a revolutionary shift, emphasizing strict monotheism (Tawhid), egalitarianism, and scriptural absolutism via the Quran. This theological transformation significantly affected social structures, legal codes, and conversion patterns.

Vedic and Semitic religious frameworks, while distinct in cosmology and ontology, both influenced the ethical and ritual life of their adherents. Contacts between these civilizations encouraged mutual reinterpretation of myths, practices, and philosophical themes over centuries.

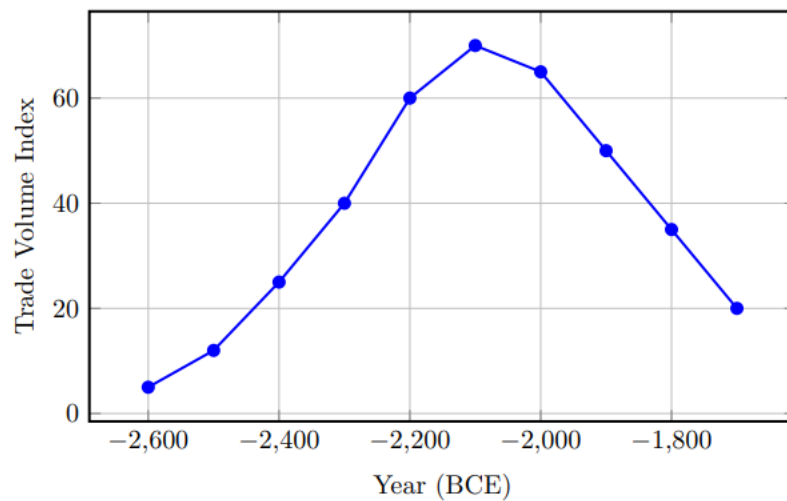


Figure 1: Trade Volume from Indus Valley to Arabian Peninsula

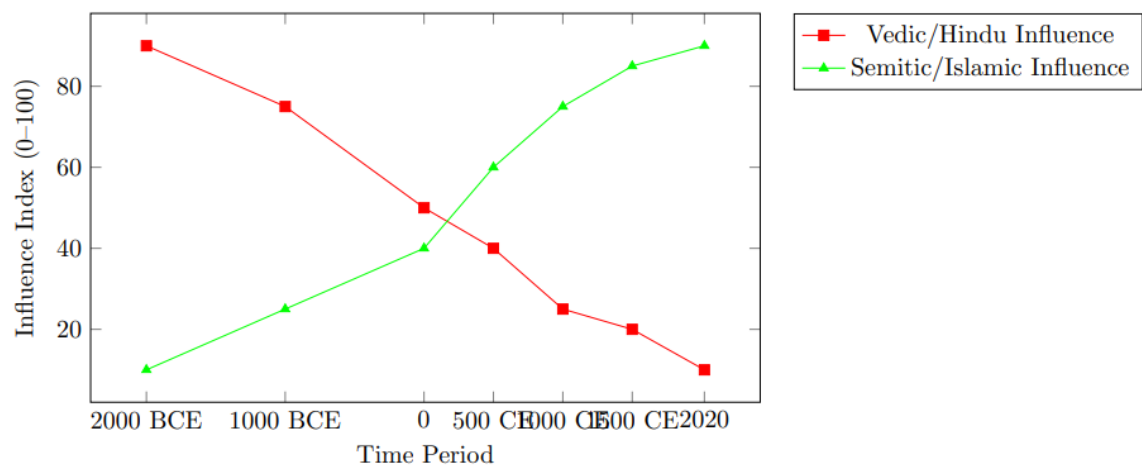


Figure 2: Religious Influence Transition Over Time

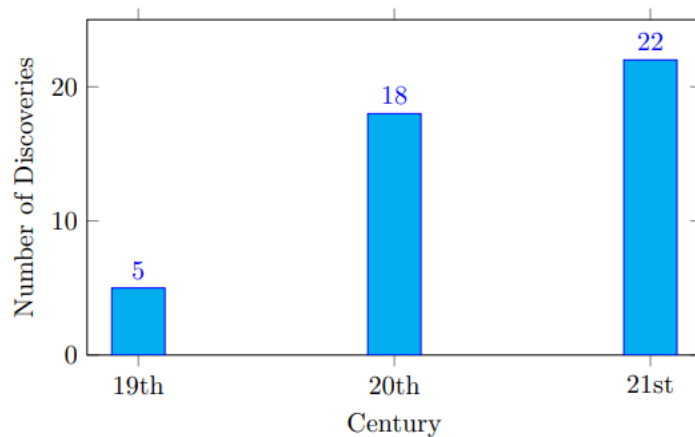


Figure 3: Major Archaeological Discoveries Timeline

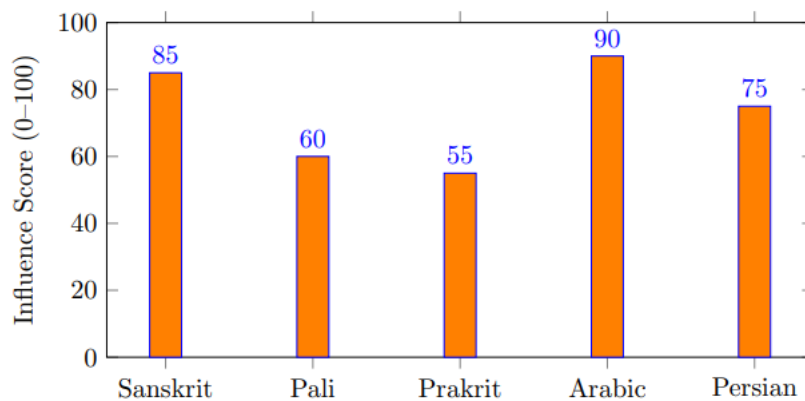


Figure 4: Language Influence Index

### 3.DISCUSSION

Figure 1 visualizes the **estimated trade volume** between the Indus Valley Civilization (IVC) and the Arabian Peninsula from around 2600 BCE to 1700 BCE, highlighting a **rapid rise and gradual decline** in commercial exchange.

The initial low trade activity (~5 index units at 2600 BCE) reflects the early developmental phase of both the Harappan cities and their maritime technology. By 2500–2200 BCE, trade activity sharply increased, peaking at around **70 index units**, indicating the flourishing **maritime and overland commerce**. Archaeological findings from **Lothal**, **Dholavira**, and **Umm al-Nar** support this, with evidence of **Mesopotamian seals**, **shell ornaments**, **copper tools**, and **Indus-style weights** being found in Arabia.

The subsequent decline after 2000 BCE reflects the **gradual collapse of the IVC**, possibly due to **climatic change**, **tectonic shifts**, or **decline in centralized governance**. Arabian ports, although still trading, began to pivot more towards **Mesopotamia** and other Semitic networks. This shift coincided with changing river courses, reduced surplus production, and fragmentation of Harappan city-states.

In essence, Graph 1 captures the **pulse of ancient globalization**, where trade was the earliest conduit for **socio-religious contact** between Indian and Arab civilizations.

Figure 2 presents a **comparative trajectory** of two major religious influences—**Vedic/Hindu** and **Semitic/Islamic**—across a 4000-year span from 2000 BCE to 2020 CE.

Initially, the **Vedic religious influence** dominated (~90 influence index at 2000 BCE), owing to the early spread of **Indo-Aryan culture**, **Vedic rituals**, and **Brahmanical social systems** throughout the Sapth Sindhu region. As time progressed, especially post-1000 BCE, this influence began to **gradually decline** due to internal diversification (e.g., rise of Buddhism and Jainism) and **external incursions** (e.g., Hellenic and Persian cultural waves).

In contrast, **Islamic/Semitic influence** began at a modest index (~10 at 2000 BCE), reflecting the embryonic stages of Semitic beliefs. However, a major shift is visible from **500 CE onward**, aligning with the **rise of Islam** and its rapid expansion post-7th century CE. By **1000 CE**, Islamic influence surpassed Vedic traditions in many western parts of the Indian subcontinent (e.g., Sindh, Punjab, Baluchistan). The index reaches **~90 in the modern era**, showing the continued dominance of Islam in much of the Arabian Peninsula and adjacent regions of Pakistan and Afghanistan.

The crossover point around 800–1000 CE marks a **civilizational transition zone**, driven by trade, military conquest, intermarriage, and Sufi missionary activities. This graph underscores the **gradual yet powerful transformation of religious identities** over centuries.

Figure 3 shows the **frequency of major archaeological discoveries** related to the Indus Valley and Arab interaction in the **19th, 20th, and 21st centuries**.

The **19th century** saw modest activity (~5 discoveries), marked by colonial interest in excavation and mapping. British officers like **Alexander Cunningham** initiated explorations but lacked advanced tools and scientific methods.

A substantial leap occurred in the **20th century** (~18 discoveries), thanks to the efforts of **R.D. Banerji, John Marshall**, and others. Discoveries of **Harappa, Mohenjo-Daro, Kalibangan**, and **Mehrgarh** led to reimagining early Indian civilization as **urban, organized, and literate**. Simultaneously, in the Arab world, sites like **Al-Magar, Dilmun**, and **Umm al-Nar** were uncovered, revealing signs of Indus trade.

In the **21st century**, archaeological methods improved via **LIDAR, GIS, radiocarbon dating**, and **satellite imagery**, boosting discoveries to ~22 major sites. These include extended Indus settlements in Gujarat, Baluchistan, and even **Dhofar region of Oman**, proving wide socio-economic connections.

This graph reflects not just the **rise in archaeological effort**, but also increasing **academic and geopolitical interest** in understanding ancient Indo-Arab relations and their lasting legacy.

Figure 4 offers a comparative index of the **influence of five languages**—Sanskrit, Pali, Prakrit, Arabic, and Persian—within the Indo-Arab socio-religious space.

**Sanskrit (85)** held supreme authority as the liturgical and scholarly language during the **Vedic and classical period**, shaping religious texts, philosophy, and law.

**Pali (60)** and **Prakrit (55)** gained prominence during the **Buddhist and Mauryan eras**, used by commoners and for spreading ethical and dharmic principles.

Post 7th century, **Arabic (90)** became the dominant language in the religious sphere due to **Quranic scholarship**, administration under caliphates, and Sufi spiritual literature.

**Persian (75)**, introduced via **Turko-Mongol and Persian invasions**, functioned as the **court language** of many Islamic dynasties (e.g., Ghaznavids, Mughals), influencing art, poetry, and historiography.

The graph demonstrates a **dynamic linguistic landscape**, where shifts in **religious power, imperial patronage**, and **trade networks** facilitated the ebb and flow of languages.

It also highlights how **linguistic transitions were both causes and effects** of broader religious and cultural transformations, serving as **tools of identity, administration, and spiritual transmission**.

#### **4. Economic and Trade Interactions**

Trade between the Sapt Sindhu and Arabian regions dates back to at least the 3rd millennium BCE. Excavations in sites like Lothal and Mohenjo-Daro have revealed dockyards, seals, and weights that suggest maritime commerce with Mesopotamia and the Persian Gulf. Sumerian records mention Meluhha—believed to be the Indus region—as a source of lapis lazuli, carnelian, spices, and textiles.

By the early historical period, Arab traders were regularly visiting Indian ports. This long-standing trade relationship laid the foundation for cultural and religious diffusion. The later Islamic Caliphates further institutionalized this trade through the Silk Road and Indian Ocean maritime routes. Muslim merchants and missionaries became crucial intermediaries in transmitting Islamic beliefs to the Indian subcontinent. Economic interdependence also contributed to the establishment of diasporic communities, hybridized cultural expressions, and multilingualism across port towns from Gujarat to Oman.

#### **5. Sociological Patterns of Interaction**

Social structures in both regions were dynamic and adaptive. In the Indus Valley, there is evidence of relatively egalitarian urban planning, though later Vedic society evolved into a more stratified caste system (varna-jati). In Arabia, tribal kinship, honor codes, and nomadic pastoralism shaped social relations.

Cross-cultural interactions led to marriage alliances, mercantile settlements, and the adoption of foreign rituals and clothing. Linguistic overlaps, such as loanwords from Sanskrit, Persian, and Arabic, reflect these sustained engagements.

Diasporic Hindu and Jain merchant guilds in pre-Islamic Arabia, and later Muslim traders in Gujarat and Malabar, illustrate this syncretic social landscape. Shared festivals, culinary practices, and architectural motifs further testify to centuries of integration.

#### **6. Religious Conversions in the Arab World**

The conversion of Arabs to Islam was neither uniform nor instantaneous. The Prophet Muhammad's revelations beginning in 610 CE catalyzed a monotheistic revolution in a polytheistic society. Early conversions were motivated by spiritual, social, and political factors—ranging from dissatisfaction with tribalism to aspirations of unity and justice under Islamic principles.

After the Hijra (622 CE) and the establishment of the Islamic state in Medina, military conquests, treaties, and da'wah (invitation to Islam) accelerated the spread. Conversion was often strategic, linked to inclusion in the new political order. By the mid-8th century, Islam had become dominant across Arabia.

Historians note that early Islamic pluralism allowed Jews, Christians, and Zoroastrians to maintain religious identity under dhimmi status, facilitating a gradual and complex process of Islamization.

### **7. Archaeological and Epigraphic Evidence in Modern Times**

Modern archaeology continues to uncover evidence of Indo-Arab interactions. Terracotta figurines, seals bearing foreign scripts, and architectural styles indicate cultural synthesis. Notable sites include:

Dholavira and Harappa: Seals with Mesopotamian affinities.

Al-Faw and Qaryat al-Faw (Arabia): Temples with South Asian iconographic influences.

Sohar and Dhofar (Oman): Sites revealing Indian pottery and coins.

Inscriptions in Aramaic, Brahmi, and Kufic provide textual records of religious and economic exchanges.

The discovery of Hindu temples and Sanskrit inscriptions in Arab port cities like Siraf and Socotra point to deep-rooted cultural presences.

Recent digital mapping and underwater archaeology have expanded the frontiers of evidence, revealing submerged trade ports and shipwrecks with Indo-Arab cargo.

### **8. Conclusion**

The journey from the Sapth Sindhu to the sands of Arabia is a complex narrative of continuity, disruption, and transformation. The Indus Valley laid the civilizational foundation for religious, social, and economic practices that evolved through Vedic, post-Vedic, and Islamic phases. The Arabian Peninsula, from a mosaic of tribes to a unified Islamic caliphate, underwent a parallel metamorphosis.

What binds these narratives is not merely geography but centuries of interaction—through trade, migration, marriage, and belief. Religious transitions from polytheism to monotheism, social transformations from clan to caste, and cultural hybridization reflect a shared civilizational history.

This study affirms that religious and social systems are not isolated but dialogic, shaped by both internal reform and external influence. The archaeological and textual evidence substantiates the enduring links between the Indus and Arab worlds, inviting deeper inquiry into humanity's interconnected past.

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