

The role of Muhammad bin Qasim: conquests and historical controversy over his religious policy

Introduction

Muhammad bin Qasim was a young commander of the Umayyad Caliphate, born in Taif and related to the powerful governor Hajjaj bin Yusuf. In 712 CE, he was sent to Sindh after Arab ships carrying Muslim women and children were attacked by pirates near Debal. At just 17 years old, he led a major expedition into South Asia. His successful campaign brought Sindh and Multan under Muslim control, making him the first Muslim ruler of the subcontinent. This was the beginning of a new phase in South Asian history where Islam started to take root.

Conquests of Sindh

The conquest began with the capture of Debal, an important port city. Muhammad bin Qasim used siege engines called *manjaniks* to break city walls and secure victory. After Debal, he advanced to towns like Nerun, Sehwan, and eventually fought the decisive battle against Raja Dahir near the Indus River. Dahir was killed in battle, and his forces were defeated. Later, Muhammad bin Qasim marched towards Multan, which became another center of Muslim rule. His military skills, strategic planning, and fair treatment of defeated populations helped him establish control over a large part of Sindh.

Religious Policy

One of the most remarkable parts of Muhammad bin Qasim's rule was his religious policy. Instead of forcing people to convert, he allowed Hindus and Buddhists to freely practice their religions. They were recognized as *dhimmis* (protected communities) and were required to pay the *jizya* tax, similar to what non-Muslims paid in other parts of the Muslim world. Temples were usually not destroyed and many remained open for worship. Local leaders and elites were included in administration, which created cooperation between Muslims and non-Muslims. This policy was both practical and tolerant—it helped avoid rebellions and created peace in the newly conquered areas.

Historical Controversy

Historians have debated Muhammad bin Qasim's religious policy for centuries. Muslim historians generally portray him as a just and fair governor who treated non-Muslims with respect and ensured peaceful coexistence. They emphasize that his rule was based on Islamic principles of justice and tolerance. On the other hand, some modern scholars argue that his policies were guided more by political needs than by religion. They say he allowed freedom of

religion mainly to keep control over a majority non-Muslim population. There are also mixed reports about whether he destroyed temples or preserved them. British colonial historians exaggerated the violence to present Muslims as intolerant invaders, while later Muslim scholars defended him as a model of tolerance. This ongoing debate shows how complex his legacy is.

Significance of His Role

Muhammad bin Qasim's conquest of Sindh was not just a military success, but a turning point in South Asian history. It opened the doors for Islam in the Indian subcontinent, and though his rule was short, the foundations he laid influenced centuries of Muslim governance. Sindh became known as "Bab al-Islam" (the Gateway of Islam) because it was the first region where Islam permanently took root in India. In Pakistan Studies, his conquest is seen as an early step in the long history that eventually led to the creation of Pakistan. His policies of tolerance, administration, and integration remain important for understanding how Muslims established themselves in a diverse society.