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Civilizational Dialogues: Pakistan's Place in the Islamic Golden Age Legacy

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ABSTRACT

This article repositions the lands of present-day Pakistan—particularly Sindh and the Punjab—as dynamic intellectual corridors within the wider Islamic Golden Age (8th–13th centuries). Rather than treating the “center” of innovation as confined to Baghdad, Nishapur, Bukhara, or Cordoba, we argue that frontier-zones and port cities such as Mansura, Debal/Thatta, Multan, and later Lahore functioned as mediating hubs between the Persianate east, the Arabian Sea, and the Indian subcontinent. Drawing on evidence from textual transmission (Arabic–Persian–Sanskrit), manuscript and coinage studies, monastic and madrasa ecologies, and commercial circuits, we show how the region's scholars, traders, artisans, and Sufi lineages translated, adapted, and re-circulated knowledge in astronomy, mathematics, medicine, linguistics, and philosophical theology. The result was not a periphery echoing a center, but a polycentric knowledge commons whose legacies endure in Pakistan's archival, architectural, and Sufi landscapes. We conclude by proposing a research agenda that integrates archaeology, historical GIS, and manuscript metadata to quantify

Keywords:
Islamic Golden Age, Pakistan, Sindh, Multan, Lahore, knowledge networks, translation movements, Sufism

INTRODUCTION

Conventional narratives of the Islamic Golden Age privilege select metropolitan courts and academies, spotlighting translation projects in Baghdad, the scientific ateliers of Khurasan and Transoxiana, or Andalusī polymathy. Yet the world that produced major advances in mathematics, astronomy, medicine, and philosophy was sustained by maritime and overland corridors that braided together port cities, frontier garrisons, shrine-towns, and caravan hubs. In this braided geography, the territories comprising modern Pakistan formed a hinge between the Persianate plateau, Central Asia, and the Indian subcontinent.

Sindh—instrumental after its early incorporation into the Islamic polity—developed administrative centers at **Mansura** and maritime gateways at **Debal/Thatta**, linking Arabian Gulf shipping with inland markets. **Multan** emerged as a treasury city and later a Sufi-scholarly entrepôt whose mercantile revenues underwrote religious and educational institutions. **Lahore**, layered through Ghaznavid, Ghurid, and subsequent regimes, cultivated scriptoria, teaching networks, and courtly tastes that facilitated the movement of texts and techniques.

Knowledge traveled in many forms: the movement of **scholars** and **artisans**; **translations** across Arabic, Persian, and Sanskrit; **coins** that stabilized exchange; **waqf** endowments that secured teaching and copying; and **Sufi** lineages that institutionalized hospitality and pedagogy. Within this ecology, figures like **al-Bīrūnī**—working in the eastern Iranian world while studying the sciences and cultures of the subcontinent—symbolize the porousness of boundaries between “regions.”

Reframing Pakistan’s place in this history highlights three claims. First, the Golden Age was **polycentric**: peripheries were co-producers, not passive recipients. Second, **infrastructures of circulation**—ports, caravanserais, madrasas, khānqāhs, and markets—were as decisive as royal patronage. Third, the **afterlives** of this era persist in Pakistan’s archival strata, mosque-madrassa complexes, and Sufi shrines, which continue to seed cross-regional dialogues.

Main Discussion (Concise Thematic Synthesis)

A Polycentric Golden Age

Treating Pakistan’s zones as **corridors** rather than margins clarifies why scientific and literary innovations diffused rapidly. Ports fed inland markets; passes ferried ideas alongside bullion and textiles. The same ships that carried paper and dyestuffs also brought itinerant scholars and instrument-makers, embedding the sciences within commercial rhythms.

Institutions of Circulation

Madrasas systematized curricula and certification, while **khānqāhs** institutionalized care, accommodation, and debate. Workshops (*kitābkhānas*) and specialized bazaars linked crafts to scholarship—critical for producing technical instruments and books. Waqf deeds stabilized these ecologies across dynastic turnovers.

Translation & Technical Practice

Translation in the east was a **long arc**, not a single court event: from Sanskrit astral sciences to Persian and Arabic treatises, and back via commentaries. Instrumental astronomy benefited from circulating **astrolabes**, **sine tables**, and **geodesy**; medicine moved with *materia medica* through Indian Ocean pharmacopoeias.

Ethics, Markets, and Urban Civics

Legal opinion (*fatwā*) and market inspection interacted with Sufi preaching to advance norms of price fairness, accurate weights, and public welfare. These urban ethics, visible in mosque–bazaar morphologies, enabled predictability essential for scholarly collaboration and patronage.

Enduring Legacies

The **architectural** and **textual** landscapes of Pakistan—mosques, caravanserais, shrines, inscriptions, and manuscripts—encode centuries of exchange. Digitizing catalogues, stabilizing conservation environments, and building open metadata pipelines can transform these legacies into resources for contemporary research and education.

Gateways & Geographies: Ports, Riverine Nodes, and Steppe–Sea Linkages

The geography of present-day Pakistan during the Islamic Golden Age positioned it as a **corridor of connectivity** rather than a closed frontier. Its ports, riverine hubs, and mountain passes integrated the Arabian Sea with Central Asia and the wider Persianate world, creating an infrastructure that sustained both commerce and scholarship.

Debal/Thatta and Mansura as Maritime Interfaces

Debal (near modern Karachi) was one of the earliest Islamic ports in South Asia, serving as an entry point for merchants, scholars, and administrators arriving from Basra, Muscat, and Siraf.

Thatta later emerged as a maritime hub, famed for its cosmopolitan bazaars, manuscript copying, and textile exports.

Mansura, the administrative capital of Arab Sind, linked hinterland agriculture with maritime trade, ensuring that scholarly and religious institutions were funded through revenues.

Multan and Uch as River-Trade Turntables

Multan, situated on the Chenab and Indus river routes, functioned as a **treasury city** and a commercial node. Its wealth attracted jurists, Sufi teachers, and astronomers, who benefited from mercantile patronage.

Uch, lying near the confluence of riverine routes, became a center for Sufi scholarship, scriptoria, and interregional teaching lineages. Its position enabled the circulation of **texts and technical knowledge** from both Persia and northern India.

Punjab Passes Connecting to Ghazni and Balkh

The **Khyber and Bolan passes** offered overland links to **Ghazni, Balkh**, and beyond into Central Asia.

These corridors were not only military conduits but also **intellectual highways**: itinerant scholars, artisans, and translators moved through them alongside caravans.

Cities like **Lahore** emerged as staging grounds for cultural and scholarly exchange, blending Persianate administrative traditions with Indic textual heritages.

Logistics, Taxation, and Scholarly Mobility

Stable taxation systems on trade routes financed **waqf endowments** for mosques, madrasas, and libraries, ensuring long-term scholarly activity.

River ferries, caravanserais, and market inspections facilitated predictable movement of both goods and people.

Knowledge transfer depended on these logistics: **a scholar's ability to reach a madrasa in Multan or Lahore often mirrored the same infrastructures that carried pepper, indigo, or textiles to Central Asia and the Middle East.**

Knowledge Ecologies: Madrasas, Khānqāhs, and Kitābkhānas

The intellectual landscape of the Islamic Golden Age in the territories of present-day Pakistan was anchored not only in royal patronage but also in a **dense ecology of institutions**. These included **madrasas** (formal centers of learning), **khānqāhs** (Sufi hospices), and **kitābkhānas** (workshops for book production and preservation). Collectively, they created a **circulatory system of knowledge**, bridging the sacred, the scholastic, and the artisanal.

Endowments (Waqf) and Institutional Sustainability

The backbone of these knowledge ecologies was the **waqf endowment system**. Land revenues, market rents, or caravan tolls were dedicated to sustaining **madrasas and khānqāhs**, ensuring continuity even during political turbulence.

Waqf deeds not only financed teachers and students but also guaranteed **stipends, manuscript acquisition, and maintenance of libraries**, thereby embedding learning in the economic rhythms of towns like Multan, Uch, and Lahore.

In Multan, Sufi shrines established endowments that allowed travelers and students to receive hospitality while engaging in scholarly pursuits.

Paper Supply Chains and Copying Workshops

The **paper revolution**, spreading from Samarqand and Baghdad, reached Sindh and Punjab by the 10th–11th centuries, enabling the proliferation of local **kitābkhānas**.

These workshops employed scribes, illuminators, and binders, creating manuscripts that ranged from Qur'anic codices to treatises on astronomy, medicine, and jurisprudence.

Thatta later became renowned for producing manuscripts that traveled across the Indian Ocean, while **Lahore's book markets** sustained a culture of commentary and marginalia.

Collaboration Across Disciplines

Knowledge ecologies blurred the boundaries between sciences and humanities. **Jurists** often collaborated with **physicians, astronomers, and mathematicians**, sharing both institutional space and patronage.

The **Sufi shaykhs** acted as mediators, embedding scientific inquiry within spiritual and ethical frameworks. For instance, astronomical knowledge was used not only for navigation but also for determining prayer times and ritual calendars.

Multan's reputation as the "city of saints" illustrates this interdisciplinary environment: Sufi hospices doubled as spaces for **debate, healing, and manuscript teaching**.

The Didactic Role of Shrines

Shrines functioned as **popular universities** of their time. Pilgrims and travelers were hosted, fed, and often exposed to **lectures, recitations, and disputations**.

The **khānqāhs** of Uch and Lahore created networks where local peasants, traders, and elite scholars interacted, producing a **socially inclusive pedagogy** absent from elite-only madrasas.

Shrines also cultivated **oral traditions**, ensuring that technical knowledge and ethical teachings were disseminated beyond literate circles.

A Circulatory Model of Knowledge

Taken together, madrasas, khānqāhs, and kitābkhānas constituted an **interdependent knowledge ecology**:

Waqf supplied financial stability.

Paper and workshops provided the material substrate.

Cross-disciplinary collaboration ensured intellectual vitality.

Shrines and khānqāhs democratized access and embedded learning in lived community life.

This ecological model helps explain why Pakistan's historical cities became enduring nodes of intellectual production and why their archives, inscriptions, and shrines remain vital sources for understanding the **polycentric character of the Islamic Golden Age**.

Translation, Commentary, and Technical Arts

The intellectual vibrancy of the Islamic Golden Age in the territories of present-day Pakistan was not merely a matter of absorbing knowledge from distant centers—it was a process of **translation, adaptation, and technical innovation**. Scholars, artisans, and Sufi teachers collaborated to move ideas across linguistic, cultural, and material frontiers.

Arabic–Persian–Sanskrit Exchanges

From the 9th to 12th centuries, **Sindh and Punjab became translation corridors**, where Arabic and Persian scholars encountered Sanskrit treatises on astronomy, mathematics, and medicine.

Works like the *Brahmasphuṭasiddhānta* influenced Islamic astronomical tables (*zijes*), often through bilingual intermediaries.

Physicians drew upon the **Ayurvedic corpus**, integrating herbal knowledge into Arabic–Persian medical texts, which circulated in Multan and Lahore’s scholarly circles.

Translation was not one-way: texts adapted in Arabic or Persian were later reabsorbed into Indic scholarly traditions, creating a cycle of intellectual reciprocity.

Adaptation of Instruments

Translation was often accompanied by the **production and modification of scientific instruments**.

The **astrolabe**, introduced from the Arab–Persian world, was locally adapted with Sanskrit calendrical knowledge for South Asian latitude calculations.

Quadrants and sine tables were recalibrated for regional contexts, merging Indic astronomical constants with Islamic observational methods.

Instrument-makers in Lahore and Multan also innovated in **metal casting and engraving**, producing objects that were simultaneously technical devices and works of art.

Artisanal Knowledge and Technical Arts

Knowledge traveled not only in manuscripts but also in **artisanship**. Metalworkers, papermakers, and dyers accompanied caravans and maritime trade, embedding technical expertise in local workshops.

Papermaking, spreading from Central Asia, became an essential support for manuscript copying in Thatta and Lahore. Paper mills and dyeing industries sustained both the scholarly economy and textile exports.

Metalwork—from instrument-making to architectural fittings—was informed by both technical manuals and hands-on apprenticeships, blurring the line between scientific and artisanal labor.

These crafts created a material infrastructure that gave scholarship its durability, ensuring texts, instruments, and monuments could endure and circulate.

Commentary as Intellectual Practice

Beyond translation, **commentary (sharḥ, ḥāshiyā)** became a hallmark of scholarly life in Multan, Uch, and Lahore. Scholars produced layered interpretations of earlier works, embedding new data or regional adaptations.

Commentaries bridged disciplines: a jurist might gloss an astronomical table to align ritual timings; a physician might annotate a translated pharmacological text with local herbs.

This practice ensured that **translation did not freeze knowledge** but continually expanded it through lived application.

A Culture of Integration

Translation, commentary, and technical arts formed a tripartite system:

Texts moved across languages (Arabic, Persian, Sanskrit).

Instruments were re-engineered to suit local geographies and needs.

Artisans translated knowledge into practice, embedding it in durable material forms.

This system reveals how Pakistan's historical regions were **not passive recipients** of the Golden Age but **active laboratories**, where ideas were tested, recalibrated, and transmitted across the Islamic world and into South Asia.

Ethics, Markets, and Urban Civics

The urban centers of Sindh and Punjab during the Islamic Golden Age were not only sites of trade and scholarship but also **arenas of ethical regulation**. Law, religion, and market practice intertwined to create a civic environment where commerce, learning, and social welfare reinforced one another.

Fatwā and Market Inspection (Ḥisbah)

Urban governance often relied on the institution of the **muḥtasib** (market inspector), tasked with ensuring **fair prices, accurate weights and measures, and moral conduct** in public spaces.

Fatwās issued by jurists shaped the ethical framework of trade: prohibitions on hoarding, usury, and fraud aimed to guarantee market stability.

These rulings were not abstract; they directly impacted the livelihoods of artisans, traders, and scholars who depended on predictable flows of goods and revenues to sustain teaching and endowment systems.

Sufi Preaching and Public Morality

Sufi khānqāhs and shrines complemented legal oversight by cultivating a moral culture through sermons, poetry, and public instruction.

Preachers emphasized values of **honesty, generosity, and service to the community**, embedding ethical norms within the daily routines of bazaar-goers and artisans.

In cities like **Multan** and **Lahore**, Sufi saints acted as mediators between rulers, merchants, and commoners, ensuring that markets remained tied to a spiritual economy of fairness and compassion.

Mosque–Bazaar Morphologies

Urban layouts often reflected the integration of religion, trade, and civics. **Mosques were constructed adjacent to bazaars**, so Friday sermons could reinforce public ethics among merchants and customers.

In Lahore and Uch, such mosque–bazaar assemblages became nodes of both economic exchange and moral instruction, physically embodying the principle that **commerce should serve communal welfare, not merely private profit**.

These morphologies also facilitated **endowment cycles**: merchants endowed mosques and madrasas, while scholars and Sufis legitimized mercantile activities through ethical frameworks.

Predictability and Scholarly Patronage

Stable and ethically governed markets created the **predictability necessary for scholarly activity**.

Patrons, whether wealthy traders or state elites, drew confidence from regulated urban economies before investing in **madrasas, kitābkhānas, and Sufi hospices**.

The result was a feedback loop: **markets sustained scholarship, and scholarship reinforced the ethical frameworks of markets**.

Civic Humanism in the Islamic Golden Age

This synthesis of **law, Sufi preaching, and urban planning** gave rise to a distinctive form of **civic humanism**:

Markets became arenas where **legal norms** and **spiritual values** were enacted.

Urban infrastructures—mosques, bazaars, khānqāhs—served as **moral ecosystems**, embedding fairness and welfare into the civic fabric.

The balance between profit and piety ensured that scholarship and commerce could flourish side by side, with Pakistan’s historic cities standing as prime exemplars of this ethical urbanism.

Afterlives & Heritage: Continuities into Early Modern South Asia and Pakistan

The infrastructures that animated the Islamic Golden Age—corridors of trade, institutions of learning, and civic ethics—did not end with dynastic turns. From roughly the 14th to 19th centuries, their **afterlives** are legible in Pakistan’s manuscripts, monuments, urban morphologies, and Sufi hospitality networks. What follows sketches those continuities and proposes a practical program for documentation and stewardship in the present.

From Manuscript to Monument: Textual and Built Records

Epigraphy as civic memory. Inscriptions on mosques, caravanserais, bridges, and shrines record endowments (waqf), craft guilds, repair campaigns, and donor lineages. They turn walls into **public ledgers** linking ethics, economy, and pedagogy.

Mosque–bazaar urbanism. Early modern Lahore, Multan, Uch, and Thatta sustained the **mosque–market** adjacency that braided prayer, price-regulation, and patronage. Processional streets and forecourts doubled as sites of instruction and dispute resolution.

Sufi hospitality as pedagogy. Khānqāhs and dargāhs institutionalized food, lodging, and teaching, preserving earlier practices of **open access** to jurisprudence, medicine, and devotional literature. Manuscript copying remained embedded in shrine economies.

Continuities in Knowledge Work

Curricula and commentaries. Madrasa syllabi in the early modern period deepened the **commentary–supercommentary** tradition (sharḥ/ḥāshiya), updating inherited astronomy, logic, medicine, and law to new contexts.

Craft lineages. Metalwork, papermaking, dyeing, calligraphy, and bookbinding retained **workshop ecologies** (kitābkhānas), with masters transmitting technique and scientific instrument-making alongside aesthetics.

Numismatic stability. Coin legends and metrology show sustained attention to **weights and measures**, echoing earlier market ethics essential to scholarly predictability and endowment income.

Conservation Challenges (Diagnosis)

Material risks: salt efflorescence, humidity cycles, rising groundwater, soot and particulate deposition, biodeterioration; incompatible modern repairs (cement over lime), iron fixing corrosion.

Urban pressures: encroachment into forecourts, traffic vibration, billboard/light pollution, ad-hoc utilities damaging fabric.

Information gaps: dispersed manuscripts without catalogues; orphaned epigraphs; undocumented repairs; limited condition baselines.

Governance frictions: overlapping custodians (Auqāf, municipal bodies, heritage departments) and episodic funding hinder long-horizon maintenance.

Digital Cataloguing: A Minimum Viable Standard (MVS)

Adopt lightweight, interoperable schemas so small teams can start **now**, with upgrade paths later.

Manuscripts (Dublin Core + IIIF-ready): Identifier (persistent ID/ARK), Title, Authors/Scribes, Date/Place, Language/Script, Material (paper/parchment), Dimensions, Watermark, Waqf/Provenance notes, Contents (subjects/genres), Images (IIIF manifest), Condition & Treatments, Rights/License, Geo-tag (repository/site).

Epigraphy (TEI–EpiDoc core): Object type (stone, tile, metal), Location (lat/long, site grid), Dating (absolute/relative), Script style, Transcription + Translation, Donor/Patron, Function (construction, repair, waqf), Photogrammetry link, Condition.

Monuments (CIDOC-CRM lite): Site ID, Phases (construction/repair), Materials, Craft attributions, Inscriptions cross-links, Waqf records, Risk factors, Interventions log.

Authority control: Names (VIAF/Wikidata), places (GeoNames/WD), terms (AAT).

Outputs: CSV for field use, JSON-LD for the web, and printable PDFs for community noticeboards.

GIS Mapping: Making Networks Visible

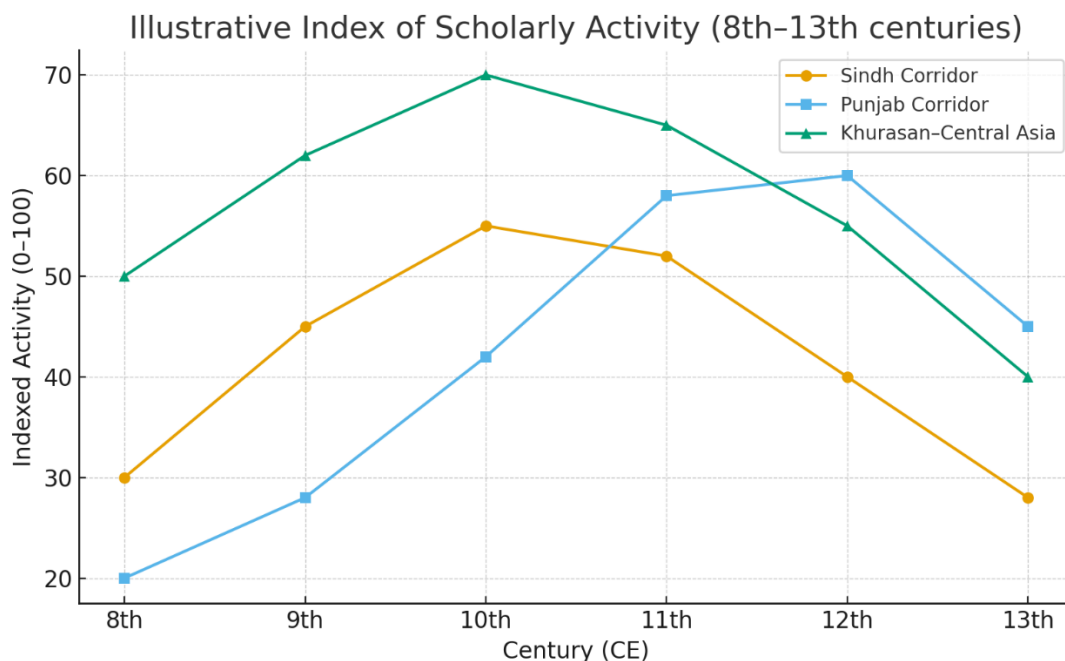
Layers: (i) Monuments & shrines; (ii) Markets/bazaar streets; (iii) Rivers, canals, fords; (iv) Caravanserais & passes; (v) Manuscript repositories.

Time: Attribute features with **temporal spans** (e.g., 1450–1650) to enable slider-based diachronic views.

Analytics: Route reconstruction, service-area buffers (how far a shrine/madrassa served), and **network centrality** (which nodes maximized connectivity).

Deliverables: Web maps (Leaflet/MapLibre), printable atlas plates for schools, and **site cards** (QR-linked) that return bilingual summaries + IIIF images.

Legal Empowerment: A pivotal milestone in this trajectory was the legislative transformation of the Punjab Model Bazaars Management Company into the Punjab Sahulat Bazaars Authority under the Punjab Sahulat Bazaars Authority Act in 2025. This shift gave PSBA full legal status as a statutory authority with independent governance and operational discretion.



Summary

Pakistan's place in the Golden Age was neither peripheral nor episodic. Sindh's ports and Punjab's riverine hubs mediated **polyglot** exchanges that braided together artisanship, scholasticism, and commerce. The lived infrastructure of circulation—**endowments, markets, and hospitable Sufi institutions**—sustained translation, commentary, and instrument-making, while coinage stabilized transactions and public trust.

Future work should: (i) assemble **linked-open** manuscript metadata across Pakistani repositories and private libraries; (ii) deploy **historical GIS** to map caravan, riverine, and maritime routes; (iii) integrate **numismatic** datasets with price and wage histories; and (iv) foreground **community heritage labs** to co-produce bilingual catalogues and pedagogical resources. Together, these steps can render Pakistan's Golden-Age legacies more legible—locally anchored, globally networked.

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