

## A Note on the National Identity of the Sauvīras

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**Abstract:** The term Sauvīra, also Sindhu-Sauvīra, indicating the name of a district and a people is often met with in historical literature dealing with India's past. But where was his district located and who actually were its inhabitants – the Sauvīras – still remain a big question mark on the horizon of modern scholarship. Some writers in the past, such as A. Cunningham (1871: 5-7, 419-20), R.C. Majumdar (1980: 107, 611-12), and A.H. Dani (1982) did attempt to find an answer but they restricted themselves merely to the first part of the question; the second part was conveniently ignored. The main objective of the present Note is to supply this deficiency and find an answer to the second part of the question.

The Note is divided into two parts. Part I contains a summary of the arguments advanced by A. Cunningham and R.C. Majumdar in support of their attempts to find a home for the Sauvīras. Part II deals with the problem of their ethnicity, their original homeland and their role in history – all in brief.

**Keywords:** Sauvīra, Sophir, Sofir, al-Asawār, Purāṇas, Varāha Mihira, Old Testament, Siyābajah, Andaghār, Zatt, Siyāh.

The term Sauvīra is mentioned in several *Purāṇas*<sup>1</sup> – mythical accounts of Indian history based on folklore – of varying date and origin. The most ancient of these dates from the 4th century CE. The *Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa* mentions Sauvīra in the composite form as 'Sindhu-Sauvīra'. The *Viṣṇu Purāṇa* has 'Sauvīra and Saindhavas'. The same composite form is recorded by Varāha Mihira in his *Bṛihat Saṃhitā* and Rudra Dāma's epigraph. The *Mahābhārata* has the single form 'Sauvīra'. Monier Williams (1899: 1255) writes that 'Sauvīras were a people inhabiting a district in the neighbourhood of the Indus'.

Many writers have pointed out the striking phonetic resemblance between Sauvīra of Indian writers and Ophir of the Old Testament. In the Septuagint<sup>2</sup> translation of the Bible, the Hebrew Ophir is always rendered by Sophir. This spelling was perhaps adopted, Cunningham remarks (1871: 420), in deference to the Egyptian or Coptic name of India, Sofir. The earliest mention of this name is in the book of Job, where the gold of Ophir is referred to as of the finest quality. At a later date the ships of Hiram, King of Tyre, 'sailed with the servants of Solomon to Ophir, and took thence 450 talents of gold and brought them to King Solomon'.

Ophir/Sophir was obviously a port city. But where was it precisely located, the Hebrew Chronicle has nothing to say. Owing to this uncertainty some scholars are inclined to locate this famous port on the Arabian coast. But the names of most of the exported articles, it is argued, are derived from Indian originals. "Thus ivory in the Hebrew text is *Shen habbin*, 'elephant's teeth', a literal translation of the Sanskrit *ibha-danta*. The '*almug*' in Sanskrit and Tāmil is *valgu*, and the Greek *Santalon* (sandal) is obviously derived from Sanskrit *Chandana*. The word used for ape is not the ordinary Hebrew one, but *Koph*, is most probably the Sanskrit *Kapi*. 'Peacocks' are *thukim*, the Tāmil *tokei*." The use of these Indian names, R.C. Majumdar (1980: 612) remarks, raises a strong presumption in favour of their Indian origin. The Ophir/Sophir seaport may therefore be looked for on the Indian coast.

### I

Where on the Indian coast was Ophir/Sophir actually located? A. Cunningham (1871: 416-20) took up this matter in some details. He had the evidence of the travelogue of the Chinese pilgrim Xuan Zang who visited India in the middle of the 7th century CE, the Hebrew text, and some

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newly discovered epigraphs at his disposal. He also made occasional use of the works of some Classical writers. Tracing the foot-prints of Xuan Zang, he remarks: The Chinese pilgrim, on leaving Mālwā moved to a place called *O-Cha-li* in Chinese transcript, read by Julien as *Vadari*. It seems highly probable, he writes, that the city of *Vadari* mentioned in the Basantgarh inscription is the same place. Moreover, 'the famous Varāha Mihira mentions the Saurāshtras and Bādaras together, amongst the people of the north-west of India. These Bādaras must therefore be the people of Badari or Vadari'. Commenting on the meaning of *Vadari*, he says: 'I understand the name of *Vadari* to denote a district abounding in the *Badari* or Ber-tree (Jujube), which is very common in southern Rājputāna (Rājasthān). For the same reason I should look to this neighbourhood for the ancient Sauvīra, which I take to be the true form of the famous Sophir or Ophir, as Sauvīra is only another name of the *Vadari* or Ber-tree, as well as of the juicy fruit. Now Sophir/Sofir is the Coptic name of India at the present day; but the name must have belonged originally to that part of the Indian coast which was frequented by the merchants of the west. There can be little doubt, I think, that this was in the Gulf of Khumbay (Cambay), which from time immemorial has been the chief seat of Indian trade with the west'.

Drawing attention to the order of place names mentioned in the *Viṣṇu Purāṇa*, he remarks (p.7): 'In the west were the Saurāshtras, Suras, Abhīras, Arbudas, Karushas, Malwas, the Sauvīras, the Saindhavas; and in the north the Huṇas, Sālwas, Sakalas, Rāmas, Ambashtas and Parastkas'. In this enumeration (p.420) he says 'we find mention of nearly every known district lying around Vadari... on the east, west, north and south. But there is no notice of Vadari itself, nor of Khumbay, from which I infer that Sauvīra most probably included the whole of these places. Vadari, or Sauvīra was therefore equivalent to southern Rājputāna (Rājasthān)'.

It can be seen that Cunningham heavily depended upon Julien's reading of the Chinese O-Ch'a-li as Vadari. According to S. Beal (1969:265) O-Ch'a-li corresponds to Aṭali or Aṭāri, and appears to be far north of Kacch. It could

be Aṭāri, a town in the neighbourhood of Multān. 'May it not have been Uch or Bahawalpur', he remarks. Thus Cunningham's speculation, it is evident, leaves much to be desired.

D.C. Sircar (in R.C. Majumdar 1980, vol.II: 107) equates Sauvīra with the lower Sindh valley. It is interesting to note, he writes, that certain Sanskrit grammatical works mention a city called Dattāmitrī<sup>3</sup> which belonged to the country of Sauvīra. This famous city, he further remarks, seems to have been founded in the vicinity of the ancient Patala, the capital of Patalene near modern Brāhmanābād, six miles to the west of Maṅsūrah in Sind. The inhabitants of this city were known as Dattāmitreyaka.

It is evident that the inhabitants were known after the name of their city. Even though we accept D.C. Sircar's information as correct, although it is based upon the evidence of some unspecified grammatical works, the problem of the ethnic origin of these people still remains unresolved.

## II

We are indeed greatly indebted to early Arab writers for recording a very important name — al-Asawār — which holds the key to the resolution of the ethnic problem. Needless to say that *al* in this name is Arabic prefix for a proper noun. Thus al-Asawāri means a person belonging to the Asawār people. The plural form of this name is al-Asawarah in Arabic. The Arab writers in general use the plural form whenever they refer to the Asawāri people. The close phonetic resemblance between Asawār and Sauvīra unmistakably drives us to the conclusion that they were in fact one and the same people living partly in Sind and mostly in western Irān.

In Irān the Asawāris were considered to be hardy and brave fighters. Their prowess in shooting arrows was matchless. Balādhuri (1978: 368) informs us that their arrows never missed the target. They had a vast territory touching coastal areas of the Persian Gulf on the one hand and the boundary of Kirmān on the other. In this territory, Iṣṭakhri (1927: 140) writes, they had numerous villages and forts. Yazdajird III (CE 632-651), the last Sāsānian emperor, greatly trusted Asawāris

and conferred high positions upon their leaders in the bureaucratic set up of the country. Three of them are mentioned by name by Arab writers. These are Hurmuzān, Siyāh<sup>4</sup> and Shīroyah.

The most celebrated among them however was a non-political figure, Salmān al-Fārsi (the Persian), a pious man who, unsatisfied with the religions of the people around him, which he had studied in depth, set out in quest of a true religion. His wandering ended up in Madīnah where at the time of the arrival of Prophet Muḥammad (PBUH), he accepted Islām at his hands and settled down. At Madīnah he saved the Muslim community from an impending disaster. This is what happened.

Early in the year CE 627, the Prophet was informed about the departure of a great army determined to root out the nascent Muslim community of Madīnah. As the odds were overwhelmingly in favour of the invaders, the Prophet consulted his companions about how to meet the challenge. In view of the bitter lesson learnt at Uḥud when the Muslims, although small in number, went out in the open to face the enemy and suffered partial defeat, it was decided to fight the invaders from within the city. Now, the city could be well defended on three sides because of houses and steep cliffs. But the southern side which opened out to gardens and oasis was hard to defend. This knotty question was solved by Salmān who suggested to dig a ditch from one end of the open side to the other. As a result the city was saved and the enemy plan frustrated.

The most powerful among the Asawāris was Hurmuzān<sup>5</sup>, the governor of Ahwāz and Mihrajān, who belonged to one of the seven noble families of Fars (Ṭabari III 1939: 171). In the year 17 / CE 638, during the reign of Caliph ‘Umar, he suffered a series of defeats at the hands of Arab enemies and was finally made a prisoner during the fight at Tustar. He was then taken to Madīnah where he accepted Islam and settled down. When Abū Lūlū Firoz, a Persian slave of Mughīrah, attacked Caliph ‘Umar in the mosque in the year CE 644, it was suspected that Hurmuzān was also involved in this heinous crime as a result of which the caliph lost his life. In consequence, Hurmuzān too was put to death.

Another noteworthy Sawāri noble was Siyāh (Black), who initially served on the vanguard of the King, but when Sūs was threatened by the advance of Abū Mūsā, the Arab governor of Baṣrah, Yazdajird, perhaps hurriedly, placed Siyāh at the head of a small force comprising 300 men including 70 experienced commanders, and directed him to reach the sour point enrolling as many fighters on the way as he wanted. On reaching a place called al-Kalbāniah<sup>6</sup>, Siyāh encamped instead of thoughtlessly rushing into the fray. Meanwhile he heard about the fall of Sūs and the advance of Abū Mūsā to Tustar. He then moved to a place between Rāmhurmuz and Tustar. There he went through a change of mind. In an overall assessment of the prevailing circumstances, he came to the conclusion that Yazdajird, for whom he had come to fight, had already lost the war. The best way out was to enter into an honourable peace agreement<sup>7</sup> with the Arabs. For this purpose he despatched Shīroyah, another Sawāri commander, at the head of a small delegation to open negotiations with Abū Mūsā. With the permission of the Caliph, Abū Mūsā conferred grants of land and money upon Siyāh and his people and told them to settle down near Baṣrah in the land allotted to them. There they dug a canal which came to be known as ‘Nahr al-Asāwarah’.

Siyāh is dubbed as ‘ill-natured, traitor and mean’ by Bahār, poet laureate at the court of Muḥammad Rezā Shāh Pahlavi, king of Irān from 1941 to 1979, in his *Shāhnāma- Naw Bakht* (Bachārāni 1980: 134). Bahār holds Siyāh responsible for all the misfortunes of Yazdajird. But for the treacherous moves and active help of Siyāh, he writes, the ‘Arab commander Nu‘mān would never have succeeded in defeating the Irānian army.

Both Bahār and Sardār Khān (1980: vol. 1: 79) consider the Asawāris as Balūch. But this hypothesis lacks support in history. The Balūch are first mentioned in Kirmān by Arab writers in the 10th century CE., while the Asawāris are amply noticed by the same writers in historical events relating to mid 7th century CE. Moreover, Siyāh is nowhere mentioned as Siyāh al-Balūṣ (Siyāh the Balūch), but always as Siyāh al-Asawāri.

In addition to al-Asawāris Balādhuri (1978: 368-69) mentions some other tribes, namely al-Zaṭṭ, al-Andghār and al-Siyābah, who belonged to different parts of Sind and had been enrolled in the Iranian army in the past. When the Iranian army suffered defeat these tribes fell into the Arab hands and were declared 'prisoners of war'. They were left in the custody of those Arab tribes who had captured them. They soon came to know about the generous treatment meted out to al-Asawāris by Caliph 'Umar, therefore they too approached Abū Mūsā with the request to be treated likewise. With the permission of the Caliph, Abū Mūsā conferred grants of land upon them near Baṣrah where they finally settled down and in the course of time got mixed up with al-Asāwarah.

To this group of tribes, Iṣṭakhri (op. cit.) writes belonged the *Āl* (descendants) of 'Umārah, better known as the *Aulād* (family) of Julandi. They infested the coastal areas of the Persian Gulf, plundered ships and were so powerful in their territory that even kings found it hard to estrange them. The 'Āl Julandi' originally belonged to Yemen and reached their present home in the wake of their Persian overlords at a time when Yemen was part of the Persian empire.

Of all these peoples, the most powerful were Asawāris whose leaders enjoyed high positions in the monarchical set-up of the Sāsānian empire. They were fully trusted upon at least by Yazdajird III, who thought that their bravery and skill in shooting arrows 'which never missed their targets' might resuscitate his rapidly shrinking empire. Their swarthy skin colour, which earned one of their leaders the epithet Siyāh<sup>8</sup> (black) suggests that they were the most ancient people of Irān pushed to a somewhat inhospitable part of the Iranian plateau by more powerful invaders from Central Asia.

In conclusion, it may be remarked that al-Asawāris were basically ancient Iranians whose homeland was demarcated by the Persian Gulf on one side and the province of Kirmān on the other. From this territory they appear to have spread, perhaps in the Achaemenian period, to the Indus where they came to be known as Sindhu-Sauvira.

## Notes

1. For an easily accessible summary of the relevant material in the *Purāṇas*, see A. Cunningham (1871: 5-7, 419-20).
2. Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament) made for Greek speaking Jews of Egypt about 3rd to 2nd century BCE.
3. Founded perhaps in the reign of the Indo-Greek king Demetrius.
4. All others have Siyāh, only Ibn Kathīr (1989, Vols. 7-8: 190) has 'Sipāh', evidently a scribal error.
5. After the defeat at Qādisiyah, he fled to Ahwāz and began raiding Arab outposts near Ahwāz.
6. Ibn Athīr (1979, Vol. 2: 552) has al-Kaltāniah'.
7. There are too many details which cannot be accommodated here. Each of the six Sawāri leaders was paid 2500 dirhams.
8. Sardār Khān (1980, Vol. 1: 79) believes that Siyāh belonged to a Siyāh-pād (black footed) Baluch tribe.

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