13

MEDIEVAL INDO-MUSLIM HISTORIOGRAPHY: I. THE SULTANATE PERIOD

The Muslims, like the Christians, had a keener sense of history and a more precise sense of chronology than the ancient Hindus, and it was in the wake of the Muslim conquest of Hindustan that historiography as a deliberate form of cultural expression was introduced into India. The Muslim love of history was continually reinforced from Arab, Turkish and Persian sources. Medieval Muslim historical literature in India was in form, subject and spirit, little different from historical writing elsewhere in the Muslim world. The advent of Islam started a great series of Indian chronicles written by courtiers or officials on the orders of their rulers or in expectation of gaining their patronage. Some of them wrote general or universal histories of the world until gradually a regional and domestic sense emerged, which was reinforced by the deliberate policy of Akbar in severing connections with the outer Muslim world.

1. General Universal Histories of the Sultanate Period (1200–1526)

The practice of writing general or universal histories of the Islamic world had come to prevail between the ninth and eleventh centuries of the Christian era. Such general histories centered on the life of the Prophet as medieval Christian historiography centred on the life of Christ. It was the providential story of Islam which gave meaning to human history.

Shajara-i-ansab-i-Mubarak Shahi

At the beginning of the Turkish Muslim dominion in north India appeared a work which in the words of Peter Hardy epitomized something of every element of Muslim historiography,"[1] as it existed at the beginning of the thirteenth century in the Muslim world where Persian language and culture were in vogue. Titled the *Shajara*, it was a volume of genealogical tables which its author, Mubarak Shah, presented to Qutb-ud-Din Aibak about 1206. Aibak ordered the tables to be transcribed and bound for his library. The genealogical tables which form the main part of the work contain one hundred and thirty seven genealogies. The critical approach of Arab historiography to its sources as, for example, the *isnad* criticism rigorosly employed by al-Tabari, is totally absent. Aibak is praised and his career described. The Ghorid victories in Hindustan are explained and the conversion of the infidels which, Mubarak says, followed those victories are also described.[2] The murder of Muhammad Ghori and the subsequent assumption of power by Aibak at Lahore are recounted. The *Shajara* is religious and didactic in nature.

Minhaj-us-Siraj Juzjani: Tabaqat-i-Nasiri

Minhaj-us-Siraj Juzjani belonged to a migrant family and was aristocratic by birth and marriage. A learned man, he held several posts before his final appointment as chief *qazi* at Delhi under Sultan Nasir-ud-Din (1246) after whom the *Tabaqat* is named. Minhaj's sources are 'trustworthy chronicles', personal evidence, hearsay and unspecified accounts. There is no proof that he had adopted *isnad* criticism or the discipline of *hadith* in ascertaining the authenticity of his source material.

The basic form in Minhaj's *Tabaqat-i-Nasiri* is what Franz Rosenthal has categorized as dynastic historiography.[3] A *tabqa* or section which is equivalent to a chapter is given to each dynasty with a sub-chapter to each ruler of that dynasty. So vast is the scope of the work that it gives an account of more than twenty dynasties of the Islamic world from the Nile to the Ganges, and from the patriarchs and prophets to the disasters that had befallen Islam, notably the eruption of the Mongols in the thirteenth century. From the point of view of Indian history, the *Tabaqat* is important for its account of the Ghaznavids, the Ghorids, the Muizzi sultans

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of Hindustan, the Shamsi Maliks, and the Mongol invasions of India.

The 'universal' history of Minhaj, writes Harbans Mukhia, does not reveal any broad historical perspective. The *Tabaqat* is, in fact, a politico-biographical narrative, describing events as part of the lives of so many individuals. Causal explanation is never attempted nor an inquiry into the relationship of individual dynasties to the history of the world.[4] The work is a string of fragmented units, each unit, whether dynastic or regnal, is independent of the other. For Minhaj, causation in history lies in human volition, though at times divine will and predestination intrude into his narrative as causing historical events. For example, it was predestined that the states of Hindustan should come under Iltumish. Again, in the second battle of Tarain (1192) almighty god gave the victory to Islam, though almighty god does not figure in the first battle of Tarain (1191) for it was a victory for Prithviraj.[5]

Sarhindi: Tarikh-i-Mubarak Shahi (1428–34)

Yahya ibn Ahamad Sarhindi, the author of the *Tarikh-i-Mubarak Shahi*, appears to have been a courtier of the Sayyid rulers of Delhi after one of whom his work is named. Sarhindi vaguely tells us that he copied his account of past rulers up to the accession of Firuz Tughlaq from 'the different histories', and after that he wrote on the basis of his own memory, observation and reliable information. Employing no critical technique, he has often recourse to the infallible formula that 'God alone knows the truth.' Yet his information is fairly correct.

The *Tarikh-i-Mubarak Shahi* is a bare narrative of mainly political events from the time of Muhammad Ghori to about 1434. It is a reign by reign treatment in strict chronological order of the deeds of the Muslim rulers and nobles of north India. Each reign is complete in itself and stands in no relationship to the preceding or following reign. From the Tughalqs on, the narrative is more detailed and consistent. History for Sarhindi is a recounting of individual events without its having any organic role. He rarely interprets, divine grace taking the place of causal explanation. Mukhia observes that there is only one instance of a full causal explanation – that of the disintegration of Muhammad Tughlaq's empire – and here, among the seven causes adduced, there is not

even a casual reference to any divine force or god's displeasure having brought about that event. The causes are all economic, political and military, combined with the rash, impolitic, unwise and cruel measures of Tughlaq. Yet, if wanting in critical methods and causal explanation and suffering form a defective idea of history, Sarhindi's work, as Hardy writes, abounds in moral precepts in prose and verse.

Muhammad Bihamad Khani: Tarikh-i-Muhammadi

Bihamad Khani's father was *muqti* of Irich, north of Jhansi, under the 'sultan' of Kalpi. Khani's *Tarikh-i-Muhammadi*, completed in 1439, covers much the same ground as Minhaj's *Tabaqat*, but adds accounts of the subsequent sultans of Delhi, of Timur, and of the struggles of the sultans of Kalpi with their Hindu and Muslim neighbors. The work also includes stereotyped biographies of saints. While Minhaj mainly relies on former histories, Khani paraphrases earlier ones. And, like Minhaj, Khani takes no trouble to examine the veracity of his sources. Both are historians from authority. Peter Hardy writes: "The absence of the discipline of *Hadith* criticism is underlined by the presence of miraculous elements dreams, visions and war missiles which do not obey the laws of gravity when aimed at the faithful."[6] History for both these authors is didactic—summoning of the wrath of heaven upon vice; and one cannot expect impartiality in histories that are largely theocratic in character. These historians abase the infidel and sanguinely curse him.

2. Particular Histories

Artistic Forms of History Writing: Nizami, Amir Khusrau and Isami

In the tenth century AD a stylistic device developed in Muslim historiography. It was the use of poetry and rhymed prose in historical panegyrics. There were three writers of historical panegyrics in the period of the Delhi sultanate.

The first was Hasan Nizami whose *Taj-us-Ma'athir* written during 1206–1217 purports to tell the glorious deeds of the Ghorid conquerors but does it by recording the minimum of historical facts

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he blames on the mildness of the Sultan's policies. It is from that we learn of the gross inefficiency prevailing in Firuz's and his acquiescing in irregularities in the muster of soldiers. were made hereditary, offences including embezzlement rebellion were forgiven, and lax control and discipline made mockery of authority. Afif's report of Firuz's victories of peace important and interesting. There is the first ever mention in works of the Sultanate period of the total annual revenue of state, and there are references to the low prices during the reign. There are details of the buildings erected, dams constructed, canals dug, and gardens laid. The *Tarikh* refers to the establishment of the department of charity and of a hospital, the installation of the astronomical clock and gong invented by the Sultan, his generosity towards servants and respect for Sufis. Afif tells us of how Asoka's pillars at Topra and Meerut were removed and set up one at the new city of Firuzabad and the other near Delhi. Some *shastris* were asked to interpret the inscriptions on the pillars. Though ignorant of the script, the *shastris* had no difficulty in making the epigraphs say that the pillars would be removed from their provenance only by Firuz.

Both works – *Sirat-i-Firuz Shahi* and Afif's *Tarikh-i-Firuz Shahi* – abound in religious and moral precepts and both depict Firuz Tughlak as an embodiment of the virtues they extolled. For such history, sources are of little account. Afif's sources are no more than 'reliable reporters' and 'honorable narrators'. Hardy finds both works defective as historical biographies. Firuz Tughlak, he says, appears as "a tailor's dummy garbed in ideal attributes."[12]

Didactic History: Zia ud-Din Barani (1285–1359)

Barani's *Tarikh-i-Firuz Shahi*, completed in 1357, was written when the author was seventy-four, and it was written in bitterness. Barani belonged to an aristocratic family which for three generations had enjoyed power and position under the Sultans of Delhi. He himself had been a *nadim* (boon companion) of Sultan Muhammad Tughlaq for more than seventeen years. But with the latter's death in 1351, the old historian fell from power and lost his property. Misfortune embittered his feelings against the new class of plebeian upstart officials who had risen to power at the Delhi court. Wounded feelings developed into a hatred against the

other sections of the society which found vent in many a lamentation in the *Tarikh*.[13]

Sources and Chronology

For Barani, as for the other chroniclers of the Sultanate period, history was not exactly a matter of investigated information but one of received knowledge of the past, and of personal testimony and memory. Barani's chief source of information was his own vast knowledge and prodigious memory. Says Nizami: "He records whatever he remembers and he remembers whatever has left a deep impression on his mind."[14] The historian also quotes as his sources the testimony of relatives and other orthodox, god-fearing persons. Indeed, on his own report, Barani based his work on personal observation as he had easy access to the court and ample opportunities of knowing the details accurately. Finally, as Nizami rightly thinks, Barani seems to have availed himself of recorded data as at the opening of every chapter, he gives a list of the maliks and khans, the principal officers and governors of the concerned ruler. Yet, Barani's method was defective as he relied on received truth—truth on authority. Facts were ascertained not by critical doubt and inquiry but by the testimony of religious and virtuous men. *Isnad* source criticism is absent, and the way Barani finds identity between *hadis* and *tarikh*, that is, tradition and history, has led Hardy to the conclusion that his historical approach was theologically conditioned.

Barani does not arrange events in their chronological order. He confuses dates and is very sparing in giving them; and when he does give them, they may be inaccurate. Harbans Mukhia observes that this indifference to chronology cannot be blamed entirely on Barani's failing memory; rather it owed to his belief in the didactic nature of history. History had certain lessons and these lessons would be intelligible even if the events described are disordered chronologicaly.[15]

Historian's Qualifications

Since the foundation of history, as Barani affirms, is 'truthfulness', the historian, he says, should avoid exaggeration and verbose language and be exact in his statements. If he utters lies, salvation would be denied to him. That Barani does not suppress facts or

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distort them is to be readily admitted. But the speeches that he p... into the mouths of some of the sultans, like those that Thucydi... ascribes to his characters, are bound to be imaginary, as Bar... composed his *Tarikh* years after the death of the Sultans concern... Nizami tells us that towards the close of the *Tarikh* Barani becom... a flatterer, finding divine attributes in the person of Firu... Tughlaq.[16]

Idea of History

Barani's idea of history can be read in his preface to the *Tarikh-i-Firuz Shahi*—pragmatic, didactic and aristocratic.

Pragmatic: History, says Barani, is a panorama of human activity unfolded before man to guide his faltering steps in life's journey. Retrospect of the past helps man to rectify the present, by giving him a rare insight into human affairs and the power to distinguish between good and evil, virtue and vice, friend and foe. It is only in history that man can learn from the experience of others.

Didactic: Peter Hardy emphasizes the didactic nature of Barani's *Tarikh* and affirms that Barani wrote it to propagate his own philosophy of history. A full exposition of the duties of a truly Muslim sovereign is to be found in Barani's other work, the *Fatawa-i-Jahandari*. History is didactic as it is to be studied with a view to deriving lessons from it.

Aristocratic: Barani's concept of society as consisting of the royalty and the upper classes had a direct bearing on his idea of history. Nizami writes:

> He looked upon the historical landscape from the foot of the royal throne focusing his attention on the royalty and the governing classes. For him history was their history and authority was their exclusive privilege. He failed to see greatness apart from and independent of kingship.[17]

Aristocratic birth was central to Barani's historical thinking as it was to his life. The thought of the low-born became an obsession with him and his contempt for them was unreserved; they are to be despised and kept in perpetual ignorance and indigence. "Merit for him (Barani) is high birth and vice low birth and neither can be acquired through any amount of effort."[18]

Form and Content

...e *Tarikh-i-Firuz Shahi* is, in its basic form, dynastic and regnal. ...effect, it is a continuation of Minhaj's *Tabaqat-i-Nasiri* narrating ...e history of nine sultans from Balban to the first six years of Firuz ...ughlaq's reign, thus covering the most important period of the ...elhi sultanate. Barani begins with a few references to Iltumish's ...ign and refers to the frequency of Mongol invasions. Then he ...oes on to deal with a very significant development in medieval ...ndian history, that is, the rise of Khalji imperialism and succeeds ...n communicating its spirit in all its aspects—military, economic ...nd cultural. Though critical of Ala ud-Din Khalji's disregard of ...e *Shara*, he considers the sultan's market regulations as a near ...miracle. And Barani gives the best account given by a historian so ...ar of Muhammad Tughlak's character and personality, as well as ...olicy and administration. The interest he shows in the details of ...dministration, land-revenue collection, and economic life is very ...aluable. *Tarikh* is a compendium of culture, apart from containing ...ists of historians, philosophers, poets, physicians, saints and ...eligious divines.

Religious and Didactic Nature

Peter Hardy gives several examples of how the religious and didactic purport of the *Tarikh-i-Firuz Shahi* often dictates Barani's explanation of historical situations. Balban keeps the Mongols at bay and subdues revolts by reason of his excellent appointments of god-fearing persons. But since he is too violent towards Muslims and tolerates infidelity in his kingdom, he loses his favorite son Muhammad in battle against the Mongols and the Sultanate passes from his family after his death. Muhammad Tughlaq confronts a sea of troubles because he patronizes unorthdox scholars – particularly those who employ Greek dialectic – and sheds the blood of true Muslims. In contrast, Firuz Tughluq's virtue enables him to enjoy unbroken success. The worldly success of Ala ud-Din Khalji is attributed to the presence near Delhi of Shaikh Nizam-ud-Din Auliya who was a friend of god. To look for the ultimate course of history outside that course is an unhistorical attitude.[19] But it should be stressed that Barani often sought to analyze causes of events on a purely mundane and rational plane as well. Believing that causation in history lies in the nature of the

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ruler, Barani presents causal explanations in a logical sequence. Harbans Mukhia gives examples: Balban's stern measures to suppress recalcitrant nobles are set against the weakness of Iltutmish's successors; Ala ud-Din Khalji's economic and administrative measures are related to the necessity of reducing the rebellious rural aristocracy to utter poverty; his market regulations were aimed at maintaining a large army at reduced expense, and the large army had to be maintained to meet the Mongol menace and to suppress the rebellious Turkish and Hindu nobles. Barani's attempt to study historical events in their causal relationship represents an advance over that of Minhaj.[20]

Subjectivity

A chief defect of Barani's *History* is its subjectivity. The *Tarikh-i-Firuz Shahi* fails to meet the canons of historical objectivity largely owing to the circumstances of its composition. The author was a man who had fallen from the plentitude of opulence and glory and reduced to indigence and negligence in his old age. "The despair that is in my heart," writes Barani, "flows in tears of blood from my eyes; a wave from the river of blood pours out of my eyes, drips from my pen and stains the paper."[21] Nizami explains this subjectivism by pointing out that Barani found the tragedy of his life writ large in the history of the period he was writing, from which he could not separate his own story. The description of Muhammad Tughalq, for example, almost follows the vagaries of the historian's own psychological moods—at one moment extolling the Sultan to the skies but condemning him and uttering curses on him at the next. Nizami sums up:

> It was not so much the Sultan who was a mass of inconsistencies or a mixture of opposites but the historian himself who was a miserably torn personality. He projected his own psychological states in his assessment of the Sultan's character.[22]

Powers of Recreating the Past

None could deny to Barani powers of recreating the past and getting the reader involved in the life of the period of his description. Even his incidental references to Iltutmish are so vital,

and significant that they light up the whole epoch and stand in sharp contrast to Minhaj's detailed but soulless account of that monarch. Revealing is his description of Balban as 'a wary old wolf', and his account of the manner in which Ala ud-Din Khalji effected the evenness of price in the market, which astonished all the wise men of the age. Barani arrests the reader's attention most in his portrayal of Muhammad Tughlaq as man and ruler. As Nizami observes, the Sultan and the historian were men of two different worlds. Yet it is Barani and not Isami or Ibn Batuta, the two other contemporary historians, who gives us a graphic, revealing and penetrating study of the dynamic but baffling personality of the Tughlaq monarch.[23] There are exaggerations. The evacuation of Delhi following the transfer of the capital could not have been so complete as to have left no cat or dog, nor could Tughlaq's experiment in token currency have 'turned the house of every Hindu into a mint.' But such exaggerations bring us nearer to the subjects discussed. Says Nizami: "Barani, in fact, had a better sense of history and its spirit than any other Persian chronicler of early medieval period."[24]

Assessment

Barani himself assessed his work as "of solid worth" and "worthy of credence".[25] None would deny that of all the histories written in India during the period of the Delhi Sultanate, Barani's *Tarikh-i-Firuz Shahi* is undoubtedly the most interesting and the most vigorous. He wrote in a simple, vivid, imaginative style shorn of ornamental verbiage, sometimes soaring high in poetic ecstasy. But doubts have been expressed on Barani's *bona fides* as an authoritative historian. Ferishta blames him for withholding the truth, Elliot for omitting or slurring some important events for fear of incurring the displeasure of his patron. And though not deliberately dishonest, Barani's subjectivity may have led to unconscious misrepresentation. Nizami takes a more kindly view and absolves Barani – despite his irremediable subjectivity and bias – from the charge of suppression or distortion of facts. Barani's merit, according to that critic, lies in supplying to his readers not a catalogue of events but glimpses into the spirit of the age.

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