

**Mughal India (1550-1605)**  
**Module-1**  
**Historiography and Sources-1**  
**(Persian Sources)**

**Academic Script**

## **Introduction**

The complex labyrinth of Mughal history has always fascinated historians. The scholars of Mughal history today have a wide array of primary and secondary sources to work on. These sources range from the stupendous work of the Turko-Afghan and Mughal court historians of medieval India to the ground-breaking 20<sup>th</sup> century scholarships that have re-defined historical studies. Historiography or the evolution of history writing in medieval India has emerged as an independent area of scholarship. The emergence of structured and systematic history writing in both Indian and Islamic culture is considered to be a late phenomenon.

Kalhana's Rajatarangini written in the middle of the 12<sup>th</sup> century, the first proper Indian historical work is considered to have little influence on Indo-Islamic historiography. Mughal historiography has strong and undeniable links with larger traditions of Islamic history writing – both Persian and Arabic.

History written in Arabic in the Indian context has been rather sparse and has been dominated by the impressive work of Albaruni. In fact medieval historiography is dominated by an enormous range of Persian texts. Persian historiography with its own strong writing tradition was breaking away from the Isnad system or the chain of narrators employed by the Arab historians.

Medieval Indian historiography before the emergence of the Mughals was dominated by the historians of the Delhi Sultanate. The early historians of this period laid down the ground for the formidable tradition of Indo-Persian historiography. Historians like Hassan Nizami, Minhaj-us-siraj and even the poet Amir Khusrau were the pioneers. But the person who broke fresh ground in the historiography of India was Ziauddin Barani. Often

wrongly criticized for looking at history from the framework of Islamic theology, Barani's approach was largely analytical. In fact Barani in one of his works has strongly argued against the forced imposition of Shariat or Islamic law.

## **The Mughal Era**

The terrain of history writing becomes more exciting and even more contentious in the Mughal era and the range of sources more diverse.

The period of Mughal history roughly from 1526 to 1856 or rather 1857 if we take the fall of Bahadur Shah Zafar constitutes the most important period of Indian history for various reasons. Apart from the political unification of India, there were also economic and other measures, which the Mughals had taken during this period. We would look at the sources for the study of this period (one might say the glorious period of our history) in architecture, in sculpture, in painting, in economic measures, in all its aspects of life. We would see the principle source written in the Persian language with

some Arabic inscriptions as well for the study of this period. This is not the only language source of the Mughal period. We have other Indian language sources. We have European language sources.

## **Nature of the Persian language sources**

### **Persian Sources – their types**

Persian sources from its characteristics, its type of writings and its contents could be divided in several aspects or in several types.

- 1) Autobiography of the Mughal emperors – two are quite clear – autobiography written by Babur in the Turkish language, then Tuzuk-i-Jahangiri by Jahangir in Persian language. There was also one of Humayun called Humayun-namah, but on that there are controversies. It is stated that he did not write; he dictated.

Others say he did not even dictate. The fourth one was written by Gulbadan Begum, sister of Humayun. She was not the emperor but she wrote from the harem.

- 2) Court histories written by various historians – These are important not only in number but also in content. These were written by various historians of the court at the command of the emperor and sometimes at the command of the nobles.
- 3) Accounts of non-official writers
- 4) Firmans, Parwanas (orders of the Mughal emperors, the provincial governors and diwans).
- 5) Letters of Emperor Aurangzeb – there are more than 25.
- 6) Inscriptions and coins – most of these inscriptions are in Arabic but they tell us some of the important nature of construction of masjid or madarsa or mausoleums, of their period of construction, the patron etc. The coins are most interesting because

not only they are of the finest quality but they tell us of the economic condition of the Mughal Empire.

The memoirs of the Mughal emperors have a tremendous influence on medieval historiography. These memoirs go beyond political history, taking us every now and then into the personal domain of the emperor. Transcending the physical domains of the emperor's palace it takes the reader into the psychological domain of the mighty monarchs. We get rare glimpses of the emperor's mind – sometimes their innermost feelings and anxieties.

## **Autobiographies**

### **Babur-namah**

Babur's autobiography, Babur-namah, first translated from Turkish by Abdul Rahim Khan Khanan during the time of Akbar in Persian. Then it was translated in English by Mrs. Beveridge in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Babur, who was a great influence on the historiography of Akbar by writing his own autobiography where he

gives the whole account of India, E-wale-Hindustan, concerning himself with not only how much revenues were realized but also with its flora, fauna, its architecture, devoting one and a half page to the prose of the sculpture of the Gwalior temples. This is one tradition which the Mughal historians were to inherit.

Babur-namah is actually a political history giving the history of the struggle of Babur and how the Afghans defeated the Rajputs. But in that one finds also other Baburs – his appreciation for the house of Man Singh along with some other temples there, his enjoyment of wine in the evening along with his companions. Significantly the 17 pages of Babur-namah on Ayodhya are missing. They are missing also from the Persian sources which would mean that these pages were missing when Humayun was coming back from Persia over land.

## **Humayun-namah**

Humayun, early in life was drawn into a bitter rivalry with his brother Kamran. He lost his Indian territories to the

Afghan leader Sher Shah Suri but managed to regain them with the Shah of Persia. After living 15 years in Persia, he came back to Delhi with a large retinue of Persian nobles. The Central Asian origin of the dynasty was now largely overshadowed by the Persian influence on court culture, art, architecture, language and literature.

Humayun-namah, according to some was dictated by Humayun to Jahar Aftab-achi, one of his servants or slaves. This seems to be a bit controversial because of the fact that although he had used the words 'I did...', 'I did not...' etc. but it seems that it is written by somebody else and not by Humayun. This is also political. Gulbadan Begum's Humayun-namah written from the harem should have been very interesting. Unfortunately there are chronological problems. She also wrote about what is happening in the political sphere. That way it does not give the life of the harem much.

## **Jahangir**



The greatest of the Mughal emperors Akbar, the son of Humayun, had not ventured into writing an autobiography. Jahangir, the son of Akbar continued the tradition of writing the imperial memoir. The account of the first 12 years when completed were bound and presented to officers. The first person to get a copy was prince Qurum, the future emperor Shah Jahan. In the 17<sup>th</sup> year of Jahangir's reign when the emperor became ill and growing weaker the task of completing the book was given to Mutamet Khan, a senior imperial officer.

In Jahangir's period the tradition that he follows is both – frank and accurate. He very clearly says 'I got Abul Fazl murdered'. There is a very important thing about Mughal historiography that one does not conceal anything. Being frank like Babur as he says 'I was afraid so I didn't attack.' So Jahangir says 'I was against Abul Fazl, so I got him murdered.'

Tuzuk-i-Jahangiri is perhaps the most interesting in the sense that Jahangir had particularly written about justice, how he had hung the golden chain of justice from his palace so that anybody can come and ring it and ask for

justice. He was very particular and then he had given his own views on various things – fruits and flowers. He said mango is the best fruit in the world. Interestingly according to legend Jahangir was supposed to marry Noor-Jahan and killed Sher Afghan for this but in the autobiography of Jahangir there is no mention of Noor-Jahan till at a very late stage. There is no mention of the marriage also. So one might ask as Mahibul Hassan has asked him, that the whole thing is merely a legend.

## **Akbar and history writing**

### **Official Mughal historiography**

In the beginning Akbar did make an attempt to have Payre-Khayalafi written, which was beginning from the Islamic word, which up till now the tradition was that one writes in praise God (Ahamd) then Ehnat (in praise of the prophet) and then come over to the Caliphs and then in one page or chapter devoted to the history of the Islamic world and then one comes to what happens in India.

From the historiographical point of view, the most significant period was the rule of Akbar. This is the period when history writing in methodology, form and content reached a new height. This was due to the contribution of an amazing personality – Akbar’s court historian and ideologue Abul Fazl.

Among the court histories the most important ones are by two people – Abul Fazl and Badauni during the reign of Akbar. Abul Fazl studied under his liberal father Sheikh Mubarak. He was very liberal and persecuted by the mullahs. He had to flee from one place to another till he was given shelter by Akbar himself. According to some Abul Fazl was against the mullahs because of this reason. Abul Fazl’s entire philosophy of history rests on the views of Akbar on two grounds. One is what he calls Sulh-e-kul i.e. toleration to all religion. The second is far more important and which created problems. He stated very clearly that reason and not faith is the basis of all religion. Abul Fazl became a mansabdar, rose very high. In 1602 he was a five thousand zat mansabdar, which was a very high post in those days. He was sent to create some kind of understanding with other people. On the

way he was killed by the Bundela chief on the order of Prince Salim, later Jahangir. He was getting jealous that Abul Fazl was getting all the honors and privileges and all the favors of Akbar.

## **Akbar-namah**

A stupendous work of medieval history writing Abul Fazl's Akbar-namah is virtually a ready reference to Akbar's India. An impeccably written political and administrative history, it encompasses a wide domain that historians preceding him had never dared to tread.

Abul Fazl's Akbar-namah is straightaway a political history. He had used the facts from the archives but he said that he had checked the facts. And how he checked those facts he had also given.

Interestingly Abul Fazl identifies his purpose – if you want to know about history you must learn about the reign of Akbar. And if you wish to know the reign of

Akbar – how he governed, what was really important then you must understand his India. History cannot be separated from Akbar. There is identification between Akbar and his India, his India right from day one and not from the beginning of the Mughal Empire. These two identifications are very clear in Abul Fazl. He was also an elite like Barani.

Then he says he is writing history not for the present generation but he is writing the account of this empire for the benefit of the intellectuals of the future generation. That is something very important. It is not that every mind can understand it; only the future generation's intellectuals can. That is why he calls it very elite.

## **Akbar-namah**

Even within the boundary set by medieval historiography and the fact that he was a court historian on the imperial payroll, Abul Fazl managed to break away from the hagiographic or the idealized biographic mould. He introduced analytical techniques into history writing and

also created a theoretical framework for the functioning of the Mughal state.

In the Akbar-namah he followed two different methods of historiography. He started from Adam and went up to Akbar, which is one stage. In this he had taken the reign of each king as one unit and continued till the arrival of Akbar. In the reign of Akbar, Abul Fazl took one year as one unit and continued to do so. In the middle of the unit if some other event occurred, he would relate that event in full and come back again to the unit. So there is a certain method of history writing in Abul Fazl's writings.

In the Akbar-namah we follow first a theory of state which he comes up with. He argues that there is a social contract between the ruler and the ruled. Much before Hobbes he comes up with that. But his social contract is of a different nature. The contract is that the ruler is to provide protection and peace and justice. The other thing is that the ruler is a divine agency, not having divine right to rule but he is a divine agency. Taking from the Illuminist he says that he receives his wisdom or knowledge- he is the recipient of the light of God

(creator) directly without any intermediary or prophet or anyone else and he is answerable to the creator, not to the people. Therefore unlike Hobbes this is a different sort of a contract.

## **Ain-i-Akbari**

Ain-i-Akbari, often considered a separate text, was actually the third or the final book of Akbar-namah. The book was meant to be an imperial gazetteer that details the organization of Akbar's court, administration and army, the revenues and the geography of his empire.

The second book of Abul Fazl which was called Ain-i-Akbari is perhaps the most important and is still being researched. Ain-i-Akbari in three volumes, translated several times in English, contains the entire administrative structure of the Mughal Empire including the palace officials and the officials of the harem, their organization, the economic details of skilled and unskilled workers, the prices, the land of the provinces, how much revenue comes, how many towns and villages and zamindars were there, how many army they had – all

these were set down in three volumes including a large number of names of the mansabdars.

Abul Fazl's *Ain-i-Akbari*, no one attempted to follow because it was so difficult. He first divides it into two sections – one which he says is concerned with this worldly side of the emperor and the other the cultural worldly side of the emperor. This worldly side he further divided it into *Manzilabadi* (imperial administration), *Sipahabadi* (administration of army) and *Mulqabadi* (provincial administration). Most importantly he gives the figures for everything – prices, wages, yields, land revenue rates – all in statistical data given in tabular form, tables, rows and columns, not just written. He is so much ahead of his time while doing this that when Blockman in 1860s edited *Ain-i-Akbari* for the first time, he dispensed with this tabular representation. His concern that this should remain very accurate is reflected by the fact that he writes each and every figure in long hand not in numerals, or in documentation because if it is written in numbers, if one digit is lost the whole figure loses its importance – lakhs become ten-thousands. But if it is written in longhand, if one figure is gone the rest



remains quite accurate. So he is concerned that there will be copies and in copying if it is in numbers this will be lost.

## **A critique of Abul Fazl**

There is an allegation against Abul Fazl that he was a court historian, he was flattered, and he wanted to please Akbar. But only those who have read his work Akbar-namah not very seriously or not reading in between the lines, can say things of this sort. Abul Fazl has the ways of criticizing his own emperor or his actions, who is his hero because he is the upholder of the policy of tolerance, the sulh-e-kul. He has a total commitment to reason and not to orthodoxy, the theocracy. Therefore he is his idol. But at certain places he has no qualms in criticizing Akbar seriously such as when Akbar did not come over to lead the campaign against Bengal and let Munim Khan do it because there was a superstition that most of the rulers, sultans lost their empire in Bengal and what hurt Abul Fazl was the superstition than Akbar not going.

In Spite of being a court historian Abul Fazl did not allow his writing to degenerate into mere menagerie. His critical faculty is always at work. Moreover, his interest in geography, culture and ways of life of the emperor as well as the ordinary Indian also make his work unique. In this he probably surpasses Badauni, the other great Mughal court historian.