

# Society and Economy of Kāmarūpa in the Early 13th Century as Reflected in the Context of Muhammad Bin Bakhtiyār Khalji's Invasion<sup>1</sup>

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Maulana Minhaj al-Dīn Abul 'Umar Usmān Bin Siraj al-Dīn Jurjānī is our principal authority about the ill-fated expedition of Malik Iz al-Dīn Muhammad Bin Bakhtiyār Khalji in 1205 and the subsequent conquest of a part of the north-eastern region by Sultan Ghiyath al-Dīn Iwaz Khalji in the year 1226–27.<sup>2</sup> It was in 1242 that our historian due to the change of guard at Delhi and anticipating danger of life left for Lakhnauti in Bengal. During his sojourn in Bengal one Samsam al-Dīn entitled *Mu'tamad al-Daulah*, who had been in the service of Muhammad Bin Bakhtiyār, narrated to the visiting scholar the exploits of the adventurous general in Bihar, Bengal, the Tibet expedition and the tragic circumstances of his death.

Interestingly enough the first official history of the Delhi Sultanate, *Tāj al-Ma'asir* of Sadr al-Dīn Hasan Nizāmī does not give an account of the conquests and expeditions of Muhammad Bin Bakhtiyār Khalji. This was simply due to the fact that in the administrative arrangement visualized by Shihab al-Dīn Ghuri for his Indian acquisitions there were only three independent

officers subject to himself. Muhammad Bin Bakhtiyār's exploits were in his personal capacity as an adventurer with only nominal subordination to Qutb al-Dīn Aibak as Viceroy of Delhi. Thus to highlight the achievements of Bakhtiyār would have been irrelevant and out of place.<sup>3</sup>

The route followed by Muhammad Bin Bakhtiyār for his expedition to Tibet and the incidental details have long been a matter of controversy. While Bardhankuti (Bardhankot) still bears the name, the river Begmati has been difficult to identify. The identification of the stone bridge with the Silhako, discovered over the Barnadi flowing into the Brahmaputra, however, furnished indication of the route. The discovery of a Sanskrit inscription opposite Guwahati, recording the destruction of a *Turushka* force in March 1206, has conclusively settled the question.<sup>4</sup>

This controversy, however, in all probability started as the natural corollary of Minhāj Sirāj's weak sense of direction. About the expedition he writes<sup>5</sup> -

After some years had passed away, and he had ascertained the state of different mountain tracts of Turkistan and Tibet to the eastward of Lakhnauti...

This statement of Minhāj Sirāj proves that his ideas of east and west were rather obscure. Here, in fact, he meant to the north and north-east. It also becomes quite clear that Muhammad Bin Bakhtiyār Khalji applied his time and energy in investigating about the life and conditions of the people of those mountain tracts. His motives in undertaking the Tibet campaign have been an enigma. However, if all facts are taken into consideration — the spirit of the Khalji adventurer, his movements, etc. — it appears that he was probably anxious to discover a new route, a short cut to Turkistan. By thus establishing contact with Turkish lands, he could have ensured the uninterrupted supply of man and material for further campaigns and expansion of his territory in Bengal. Further, an ambitious and adventurous men like Bakhtiyār could even have thought of the possibility of establishing a kingdom independent of the control of Delhi.<sup>6</sup>

It appears that Bakhtiyār had made very thorough preparations for his campaign. He planned this expedition with

a force of ten thousand select cavalry.<sup>7</sup> One can easily imagine what an immense Turkish army Bakhtiyār must have subsequently poured into Bengal to have enabled him to detach ten thousand cavalry for an expedition into Tibet, without weakening his garrison in the newly conquered provinces of Bihar and Bengal, especially as Minhāj Sirāj tells us that at the same time he sent a detachment under Muhammad Shirān to invade Jajnagar (Orissa).<sup>8</sup> Muhammad Bin Bakhtiyār had established contact with some tribes also, which he must have believed could be helpful in the realization of his objectives. According to the *Tabaqat-i Nasiri*,<sup>9</sup>

In the different parts of those mountains which lie between Tibet and the country of Lakhnauti are three races of people, one called the *Kunch* (Koch), the second the *Mej* (Mech) and the third the *Tiharu*; and all have Turkish countenances. They have a different idiom too, between the languages of the Hind and Turkish. One of the chiefs of the tribe of *Kunch* and *Mej*, whom they were wont to call Ali, the *Mej*, fell into the hands of Muhammad Bin Bakhtiyār Khalji, and at his hand also the former became a Musalman.

Ali Mech conducted Bakhtiyār to those hills and acted as his guide. When the *Rai* of Kamrud (Kamrupa) came to know about the proposed campaign, he sent a message to Bakhtiyār asking him to defer his campaign to the next year, when he offered to help him in the conquest of that area. Bakhtiyār did not accept his advice and pushed ahead towards the mountains of Tibet.<sup>10</sup>

Kamrud or Kamrupa of *Tabaqat-i Nāsiri* included the western portions of Assam together with the Bengal districts of Rangpur, Rangamati (which, later during the British period were added to the Goalpara district) and Sylhet. It was first conquered by Sultan Ghiyath al-Dīn Iwaz Khalji, an immediate successor of Bakhtiyār in the year 1226-27.<sup>11</sup> Rangpur is stated to have been founded by Bakhtiyār Khalji during his expedition into Tibet. A seventeenth century chronicle makes it the equivalent of Hajo (Koch Hajo), Gauhati and dependencies.<sup>12</sup> Bakhtiyār, no doubt an adventurer *par excellence*, combined in himself all the qualities of a great general and a wise

statesman. For we are informed by Minhāj Sirāj that in all the areas he conquered, he established mosques, educational institutions, *Khanqahs* or charitable establishments consisting of Students' Hostels and travellers' guest-houses, founded cities, established military outposts at strategic points, and introduced the coinage of money. He laid down embankments and constructed roads and bridges.<sup>13</sup>

Ali Mech took Muhammad Bin Bakhtiyār to Burdhankot.<sup>14</sup> This fact is substantiated as follows:

A river, Begmati,<sup>15</sup> flowed in front of that place and when it entered the country of Hīndustān, it was called in Hindi dialect, *Samund* (i.e. ocean). Up this river Ali Mech carried the army of Bakhtiyār for ten days, till he reached a place where there was a bridge of hewn stone, consisting of more than twenty arches.

When the army had crossed the bridge, Bakhtiyār installed there at the head of the bridge two of his *amirs* — one of them was a Turkish slave-officer and the other a Khalji — with troops to guard the bridge till his return. It was here that Bakhtiyār received a message from the *Rai* of Kamrupa.

For fifteen days the army of Bakhtiyār kept on passing through the difficult defiles and passes of the Himalayas. On the sixteenth day the army reached the open country of Tibet. The area was well populated and well under cultivation. Ultimately the army reached a strong fort and started ravaging the area. The people of the fort as well as the adjoining areas assembled to give battle, which started at daybreak and continued till sunset. Many Muslim soldiers fell on the field. Here we get an interesting and probably the earliest account of the defense system of the people of the region. Minhāj writes,<sup>16</sup>

All the defensive arms of the host were of pieces of the spear-bamboo, namely, their cuirasses and body-armor, shields and helmets, which were all slips of it, crudely fastened and stitched, overlapping (each other), and all the people were Turks, archers, and furnished with long bows.

Minhāj's enquiries about Karbattan (which was in all probability Kumrikotah in Bhutan), brought to him the following information:<sup>17</sup>

- i) Karabattan had walls of hewn stone.
- ii) Its inhabitants were Brahmins and Nunis.
- iii) The city was under a *Mihtar*, i.e., chief or lord.
- iv) In the cattle market of that city about 1,500 horses were sold everyday and all the horses that reached Lakhnauti came from that city.

These horses were of the *Tangan* breed and Bhutan was famous for them during the medieval period. In the Bengal and later Mughal cavalry *Tangan* horses were quite popular.<sup>18</sup>

After discovering the nature of the tract and finding his soldiers exhausted and worn out by the march, Bakhtiyār consulted his *amirs*. They advised retreat and suggested an invasion the following year with better preparation. Minhāj thus records the fate of the retreating army of Muhammad Bin Bakhtiyār Khalji:<sup>19</sup>

When they retreated, not a blade of grass or a stick of firewood was to be found throughout the whole route. The inhabitants had burnt it all, and those who lived in the defiles and passes had moved off from the line of route. During these fifteen days the cattle and the horses did not get a *Sir* of food or a blade of grass. The soldiers had to kill their horses and eat them till they came out from the mountains into the country of Kamrupa and reached the head of that bridge. The reason was that enmity had arisen between the two *amirs* (who were left to guard that bridge) and, in their discord, they had neglected to watch the bridge and protect the road, and had gone off. The Hindus of the Kamrupa country came and destroyed the bridge.

When Bakhtiyār reached the bridge, he found to his great misfortune that there was no way of crossing the river and no boats were available. Under the circumstances he had to halt at some place and construct some boats. He found temple in the vicinity and sought shelter in it. This temple according to Minhāj:<sup>20</sup>

was of exceeding height, strength and sublimity and in it numerous idols both of gold and silver were deposited, and one great idol was so large that its weight was by conjecture upwards of two or three thousand *mans* of beaten gold.

There has been a great deal of controversy among scholars in identifying this temple. Abd-al-Salam, the English translator of *Riyāz al-Salatīn*, is of the opinion that very likely it was the Mahumani temple in Kamrupa.<sup>21</sup> E.T. Dalton identifies it with the temple of Hayagrīvamādhava at Hajo,<sup>22</sup> whereas T.K. Sharma thinks that it was the temple of Madan Kamdeva in the same area.<sup>23</sup> In a recent study, however, both these opinions have been referred without any conclusive remark.<sup>24</sup>

Bakhtiyār devised means for obtaining wood and rope for the construction of rafts and crossing the river. When the *Rai* of Kamrupa came to know of these reverses, he issued commands to his subjects so that they came pouring in crowds, and round about the idol temple they began planting spiked bamboos in the ground and wearing them together, so that "it was appearing like unto walls."<sup>25</sup> Quickly deciding upon the course of action, Bakhtiyār made a rush to break the fence and reached the open plain. On reaching the riverbanks he halted with his army. Suddenly some soldiers urged their horses into the river. The water was fordable for a short distance only. As the soldiers rode further, it became impossible to swim and many soldiers got drowned. When Bakhtiyār's soldiers reached mid-stream, they all perished. Bakhtiyār and nearly one hundred of his horsemen succeeded, with great difficulty, in crossing the river.<sup>26</sup>

The Koches and Meches heard about the disaster that had befallen the forces of Bakhtiyār. They made up their mind to extend a helping hand to him; particularly Ali Mech's kinsmen received Bakhtiyār and rendered him all possible help in reaching Deokot.<sup>27</sup>

Admittedly, all the above-mentioned details have come from a particular source, a political chronicle that covers the history of the Delhi Sultanate till A.D. 1260. But there is also a different source belonging to the genre of Sufī literature, the collection of conversations (*Malfuzāt*) of the Indo-Muslim

mystics, from which we can learn more about the socio-cultural life of the people in Kamrupa and its environs. At least two such works talk about the spiritual territory (*Wilayat*) of Shaykh Jalal al-Dīn Tabrezi, a contemporary of Muhammad Bin Bakhtiyār Khalji and no less adventurous and peripatetic than the latter. The *Malfuzāt* of Shaykh Nizām al-Dīn Auliya of Delhi (d. 1325) *Afdal-al Fuad* collected by Amir Khusro refer to the spiritual territory of Shaykh Jalal al-Dīn Tabrezi in an area where human sacrifice was prevalent<sup>28</sup>. Another collection of conversations is that of Shaykh Bandanawaz Gesuduraz of Gulbarga, a disciple and *Khalifah* of Shaykh Nizam al-Dīn Auliya. This work, entitled *Jawami'-al Kalim*,<sup>29</sup> provides more details on the authority of Maulana Ata Allah, a Sufi, who, according to one information was the spiritual preceptor of Muhammad Bin Bakhtiyār Khalji and lies buried at Deokot where Bakhtiyār was assassinated by Ali Mardan Khalji.<sup>30</sup>

Ibn Batutah informs that Shaykh Jalal al-Dīn Tabrezi was living in Kamrupa where he came from Sāttgām (Chittagong) to visit this saint.<sup>31</sup> *Jawami'-al Kalim* states that when the saint reached this region he became the guest of a flower-seller (*Gul Farosh*) and witnessed a hue and cry. Upon enquiry he was told:<sup>32</sup>

...here is a tradition to offer human sacrifice to a demon and the local chief orders to offer one young man everyday. Today we have been asked to offer our only son. If we do not comply with the order the chief will kill us... when the sacrifice was being offered the Shaykh entered the idol temple where the ghastly act was to be performed, killed the demon with his stick and saved the boy. Seeing this the flower-seller and his kinsmen embraced Islam.

The present author is of the opinion that the saint under discussion is in all probability the saint of *Poa Mecca Durgah* at Hajo whose name over the centuries became popular as Ghiyath al-Dīn Auliya<sup>33</sup>.

The helping hand offered to Muhammad Bin Bakhtiyār Khalji by Ali Mech and his kinsmen, the former's taking shelter in temple, Hajo's renown for its temples, Shaykh Jalāl al-Dīn Tabrezi's activities in the same area and conversion of

the flower-seller and his kinsmen, all point to a great syncretic tradition in the area. The process of conversion to Islam pioneered by Muhammad Bin Bakhtiyār Khaljī in the beginning of the 13th century and continued by Shaykh Jalāl al-Dīn Tabrezī in the 1320's marked the beginning of Muslim pockets in the region adding flavour to the rich social and cultural life of Kamarupa and its environs.

#### NOTES AND REFERENCES

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7. *Tabaqat-i Nāsiri*, *op.cit.*
8. *Ibid.*
9. *Ibid.*
10. *Ibid.*, p. 564.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 594.
12. Muhammad Kazim, *'Alamgir Nama*, edited by Khādīm Hussain and 'Abd-al Hayy, *Bibliotheca Indica* Series (Calcutta, 1865–73), p. 678.
13. *Tabaqat-i Nāsiri*, *op.cit.*, pp. 560–561.
14. This was a city said to have been founded by Shah Gurshasp during his legendary wanderings in the east.
15. This was the old Tista, as Blochman had suggested in "Contribution to History and Geography of Bengal", *Journal of Asiatic Society of Bengal* (hereafter *JASB*), 1875, No. 3, Part 1, p. 283.
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