

Fathiyah Ibriyah : Manifestations of Mughal Interest in North-East India

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Background

The history of Medieval India is marked by one of the major developments in the cultural history of India and that is the writing of history, not only of the reigning monarchs or ruling families but of the people of the country as well. In whatever area the Muslims went an account of that area of land, people, their religions, customs, morals and values were included in the official and private histories of the period. These histories were not kept only as more official records but for the use of the monarchs and the people as a whole. The Muslim monarchs were extremely sensitive regarding the verdict of the posterity on their deeds and they used history to know the policies pursued by the previous monarchs to put forward as object lesson to illustrate the consequences of foolish as well as wise methods. With this end in mind official history writing started just after the establishment of Muslim rule in India.

Muslim penetration into eastern India started under the leadership of adventurer soldier, the Khalji Turk Ikhteyar-ud-Din Bin Bakhteyar Khalji, a favourite and confidant of Sultan Shihabuddin Ghori (d. 1206). This overzealous, ugly-looking, short but brave and courageous soldier after successfully conquering Bihar and Bengal came to the North-Eastern part of India, the present day Assam and although initially he was successful but his campaign ended in disaster. But the unsuccessful campaign of the ill-fated adventurer paved way for the future generation of Delhi Sultans, the Muslim ruler of Bengal and the Mughal Emperors in the North Eastern India and the region became a matter of special interest for them. The first official history of the Delhi Sultanate the *Taj-ul-Ma'asir* of Hasan Nizami is silent about the activities of Ikhteyaruddin Bin Bakhteyar Khalji. But the other contemporary official history, the *Tabaqat-j-Nasiri* of Minhaj Siraj gives full details

of the campaign. Interestingly enough, Minhaj Siraj speaks about the tribes of the Kuch and the Mich. about Kamrup, its people, their language, religion, land, population, flourishing villages, forts, their valour, weapon and warfare. The trend set by Minhaj Siraj was pursued by Zia-ud-Din Barni,² Abul Fazl³ and the later historians.⁴ The last of all the contemporary Persian source about the North-Eastern part of India exclusively, is the one written by a companion of Mirjumla during his Assam expedition. This Persian work is *Fathiyah Ibbriyah* of Shihabuddin Talish and here an humble attempt has been made to highlight its historical significance by analysing a few informations.

The first Muslim military expedition to Assam came via Bengal and the leader of the expedition Ikhteyar-ud-Din-Bin Bakhteyar Khalji's disastrous failure more due to the natural and geographical situation of Assam than to the valour and methods of warfare of the local people. Nature has carved out Assam in such a way that during that period, centuries before the development of modern means of transport even entering into the region was no mean achievement. The ruler of Delhi took lesson from the failure of the campaign but the Muslim inroads never stopped. Besides Muslim traders, adventurers, a considerable number of Muslim saints also came into this region.⁵ Many Sultans of Bengal laid successful campaigns in Assam though short lived, these campaigns worked as a catalyst which stirred the Muslim relations with Assam. During the reign of Jahangir (1606 - 27) Kuch Bihar and parts of modern Assam was conquered through the governors of Bengal. Like earlier conquests this also proved to be short lived and taking advantage of the confusion at the Mughal Court due to the war of succession among the sons of Shahjahan (1627-58) the Mughal Yoke was overthrown by the rulers of Kuch Bihar and Assam. After Aurangzeb (1658-1707) came to the Mughal throne, he appointed Khan-i-Khan (the Chief noble) also called by the emperor as Yar-i-Wafadar (the faithful friend) as governor of Bengal. Mirjumla led a fresh campaign to Kuch Bihar and Assam in the fourth and fifth regnal year of Aurangzeb's reign that is in 1072-73 A. H./1662-63 A.D.

Historical Importance of Fathiyah Ibbriyah

Mirjumla was accompanied by a scholar, poet and elegant writer named Shihabuddin nom do plume Talish, who was in constant attendance of the Khan-i-Khanan through the whole campaign and was not only an eye witness of all the events narrated

in the work, but actually shared in all the fatigues and dangers of the expedition. Talish wrote an accurate and detailed history of the expedition and description of the country, its geography, beautiful landscapes, people, their customs, manners, methods of warfare, weapons and praises at length bravery of the Ahoms in the Battlefield, their hardiness, enterprising nature and their skill.

About the nomenclature of the work Talish says that ; since his writing gives the account of the victory and admonition.

“And since this writing is an account of the victory and admonition, I name it *Fatihyah Ibriyah*. e. admonished Victory”.

Sir Jadu Nath Sarkar has translated it as “the victories that give warning” ⁶. No doubt one of the meaning of “ibrat” in Arabic is warning but the other meaning which perfectly suits the connotation is admonition.

The work is divided into a Muqaddimah (preface or prolegomena) and two Maqalas (Chapters), as follows :

Prolegomena - causes of the march of the imperial army into Kuch Bihar and Assam.

Chapter I Khan-i-Khanan's march against Bhim Narayan and conquest of Kuch Bihar.

Chapter II Conquest of Assam, this chapter forms the major portion of the work and after the conquest of Assam it is further divided into five sub- chapters, they are :

1. Description of the length and breadth and special features of the kingdom of Assam and the manners and customs of the Assamese.
2. Description of Lakhaugarh and the fleet and the occurrence of sufferings.
3. Description of the epidemic, diseases and outbreak of famine at Grahgaon and Mathurapur.
4. Description of the clearance of way and end of famine and pestilence.
5. Accounts of the peace treaty and deliverance of the Muslims form the cruel climate of Assam.

The history ends with the death of the Khan-i-Khanan, which took place on a boat at a distance of two Kos from Khizrput on Wednesday, the 2nd Ramazan 1073 A.H./1663 A.D.

The word ; the heavenly abode is his resting place, forms the chronogram of his death.”

There are several manuscripts of the work in various libraries of the world. The Bodlain library manuscript ⁷ contains the

history down to the month of Shaban 1076 A.H./1666 AD. This is unaccountable, since the date of composition 1073 A.H. is distinctly given at the end of this as well as some other manuscripts.⁸ Perhaps it is the continuation of Talish's account of his in complete history of Bengal down to the conquest of Chatgaon by Shaista Khan in 1666. Other copies of the manuscripts are in British Museum,¹⁰ India Office,¹¹ three copies in the Khuda Bakhsh Oriental Public Library, Patna¹² and one in the Library of Asiatic Society of Bengal.¹³

No adequate single volume study of the work in English has so far been attempted, even the original Persian that still awaits standard critical edition. Although individual fragmentary studies has been done. Individuals like Elphinstone,¹⁴ Elliot,¹⁵ Blochman¹⁶ and Sir J. N. Sarkar¹⁷ had included portions of *Fathiyah Ibriyah* in their works. Sarkar translated about nineteen folios of the work mostly as a corrective to Blochman's translation. An M. Phil dissertation has been submitted in the Manipur University and the candidate has edited the Persian text and prepared the dissertation based on the three manuscripts in the Khuda Bakhsh Oriental Public Library, Patna.¹⁸ This is no doubt a good attempt for the study of Medieval North-East in the light of contemporary sources. An Urdu translation of the work was done by Mir Bahadur Ali Hussaini¹⁹ and a French version of the same by T. Paive.²⁰

Shihabuddin Talish's approach to history is literary. Although he strained after a pedantic display of eloquence and rhetorics his account is quite accurate and as Sir J. N. Sarkar observed the Buranjis prove his accuracy²¹. Moreover, throughout the account he has not exaggerated anything. Besides, being a poet and scholar, he seems to be a Hafiz of the Holy Quran because from the beginning to the end his entire account is interspersed with Quranic verses. Although, writing for the Mughals, he does not give credit of the victory to the Mughal might or valour rather appreciates the Ahoms for their bravery and laments that they fell victim to their ill-fate. This is not probably justified on the part of Sir J. N. Sarkar when he says that, "a still stronger proof of Ahom valour is the abuse he (Talish) applies to them; (Ahoms), they had dealt the Mughal invaders some very hard knocks."²² What Talish uses for the Ahoms, the Kuch Biharis, the Bhutanis and some other hill people which, Sarkar has not mentioned is not an abuse but the negative attributes which is an essential literary requirement for the anti-heroes and one must keep in mind while analysing *Fathiyah-Ibriyah* that it represents the Mughal point of view not the Ahom or the

local outlook. A still closer scrutiny of Talish's work reveals that the author's ill feelings and negative approach to the Assamese was the result of deep sense of nostalgic feelings caused by the fatigues and dangers of the expedition coupled with the climatic conditions and environmental tensions of the pestilential country. But at the same time, Sarkar admits that, "on the physical feature of the country and the manners and character of the Ahoms before they had been completely Hinduised, he is a valuable contemporary witness. These are exactly the points on which the native Buranjis are silent" ²³

In his *History of Medieval Assam* ²⁴ (13th - 17th Century) Dr. N. N. Acharyya has claimed that he has based his study on original Assamese sources but one is intrigued to find all the Medieval Persian sources related to the North-East has been listed, though the author has put them in the category of "foreign accounts", ²⁵ which is again quite strange. Dr. Acharyya has very casually referred to *Fathiyah Ibriyah* and has tried to dismiss it summarily by stating that he has based his study on the original Assamese sources but he also admits that the Ahom Buranji was finally compiled during the nineteenth century and maintains that its author evidently had access to very early materials ²⁶ Dr. Acharyya may have good reasons to disagree but one expects a proper discussion. This is all the more necessary because on a few occasions the book echoes virtually the same observations as made by the author of *Fathiyah Ibriyah*.

Treatment of North-East in Fathiyah Ibriyah

The reasons for the fresh Mughal expedition in the north-east India mainly Kuch Bihar and Assam has already been briefly mentioned. When the Mughal army reached Kuch Bihar it occupied the territory but failed to capture its Raja, Pran Narayan, ²⁷ who escaped to Bhutan. Talish first gives the geography of Kuch Bihar and then says that ;

"the Kingdom of Kuch Bihar has beautiful moderate climate and its environs in its greenery and likelihood of its houses and garden is distinct from rest of Hindustan. Its trees in accordance with the Quranic verse ;
And with fruits, any that they may select, ²⁸ are ladden and its fountain is again in accordance with the Quranic Concept, No afterache will they receive there from, nor will they suffer intoxication, is full of taste. Its beautiful climate is a natural treatment for the blinds and heartthrob for the disheartened lovers, its

bird-hunting sights are like the flower-beds of heaven and its grasses reminds one of the heavenly abode.³⁰

Then the author refers about different tasty and unique fruits, the Kuch and Mich tribes and says that the Raja of Kuch Bihar is held in high esteem by all the Rajas of the land and the land of Kuch Bihar is supposed to be a sacred place as Mecca was before the advent of Islam.³¹ Then Talish gives a complete picture of the personality and character of the Raja, he writes ;

“And this Raja Bhim (Pran) Narayan was a noble, powerful, mighty and fond of Company King. He never separates his lip from the wine cup nor his hand from the flagon. In his mind nothing other than the songs of beautiful singers exists and was addicted to pleasure seeking. In his pursuits of joy and company he did not look after his Kingdom.

Many kingdoms the drunkards gave up from their hands, the cunning wealth always avoids those sunk in ecstasy.

His palace is regal, has a splendid bath, a darshkan, private rooms, accommodation for the harem, for servants, baths and fountains, and a garden. In the town there are flower-beds in the the streets and trees both sides of them. The people use the sword, firelock and arrows as weapons. The arrows are generally poisoned ; its mere touch is fatal. Some of the inhabitants are magicians, they read formulas upon water and give it to the wounded to drink who then recover. The men and women of this land is slightly greenish in colour. The son of the Raja deserted his father and joined the Nawab (Mirjumla) and accepted Islam. The Raja was annoyed and kept his son always in rigordus imprisonment”³²

The narrative further develops with the flight of the Raja to Bhutan. One Bhutanese was brought by one of the soldiers and this Bhutanese agreed to work as a messenger of Mirjumla to Dharm Raj the Raja of Bhutan about whom Talish was informed that he, the Raja of Bhutan, has completed one hundred-twenty years of age, his diet is only banana and milk and is far away from all kinds of human waaknesses and bodily contacts. He is a just ruler and very well looks after his subjects.

The Raja of Bhutan was asked by Mir Jumla to handover Pran Narayan to the Mughal army or expel him from the territory of Bhutan. The king of Bhutan replied that Pran Narayan entered Bhutan without his permission and he does not want to expel the unwanted guest.³³

The preceding narrative of Talish is regarding the invasion of of Assam and its subsequent conquest, the capture of jogighopa,

Srighat, Pandu, Kajali, Gauhati, fort of Simlagarh and Koliabar. The Ahom retreat to Lakhaugarh, the flight of the Ahom King, occupation of Garhgaon by the Mughal army and finally the conclusion of peace, etc. these details have been given by Sir Edward Gait based on the informations gathered from *Fathiyah Ibriyah*.³⁴ The subsequent sub-chapter on the features of the kingdom of Assam and the manners and customs of the Assamese has been translated by Sir J. N. Sarkar and has also been included by Gait.³⁶ Here and an attempt is being made to highlight some of the interesting and revealing observations of Shihabuddin Talish which has been consciously or unconsciously left out by almost all the writers and analysts who used *Fathiyah Ibriyah*.

To begin with, curiously enough Talish while writing about the fort of Kajali informs us that, it is near the same Kajaliban which is the grazing ground of the elephant and is quite famous in Hindustan. Then he says that Raja Makardhwaj, ruler of the kingdom of Darrang came to visit Mir Jumla and presented two iron-chains for the elephants.³⁷ While discussing the construction and architecture of the fort of Simlagarh which was made of mud, Talish is amazed and his spontaneous reaction after the first sight was that its structure is beyond the limits of imagination, the inhabitants were ready for its guarding more than the flies and birds in number, then Talish quotes a matter of fact verse which suits his observation,³⁸

Nobody saw its depth but with the conscience,

No one could get its height but through imagination.

Appreciating a conquered enemy's might and valour is not a mean achievement of this cultivated writer from Delhi and this was not the only occasion that he was amazed. there are numerous observations where Talish praises the Assamese. But there were occasions which gave him shock also, mention is made of an Assamese Youth who belonged to some aristocratic family and lived for a considerable period in the Mughal empire. This youth at the time of the siege of the fort of Simlagarh misled the Mughal army by stating that he would guide them to a safer and relatively shorter route so that the fort is besieged easily. But he lied and a good number of Mughal army perished including the Assamese youth. While writing about this tragedy a shocked and sobbing Talish laments,³⁹

The nature of a wolfs' baby is that of a wolf

Even if he grows with the human beings.

On such occasions Talish uses negative attributes for the Ahoms but never abuses them as stated by some leading modern writers of Medieval Indian history.

Sarkar, seems to be quite critical of Talish for the latter's account of some hill dwellers of Assam. Talish was neither an anthropologist nor did he discuss the process of the evolution of human society but what he observed during the seventeenth century is now a matter of crucial academic interest for the social scientists. In course of his observations, he says that the people are half naked, not only that while giving informations about the flight of the Ahom Raja, who first wanted to escape to the hilly tracts of southern Assam, Talish speaks that, people of this hill perform intercourse shamelessly in the streets and markets and the womenfolk does not cover their body except for the breast. The justification given by these people is that since at the time of birth everyone sees the baby naked there remains no room for covering the body and since the breasts develop later it must be covered.⁴⁰ About the Assamese Muslims, Talish says that they are Muslims for name sake only, in their social life and behaviour they are more Assamese than Muslims. Perhaps Talish failed to understand that in the absence of strong Muslim religious group and due to environmental and ethnic influences the Assamese Muslims submerged into the larger culture of Assam and were not in position to preserve much of their original intellectual and psychological heritage.

In his account of the outbreak of epidemic and famine in Graha-gaon and Mathurapur, Talish informs us that the hills around Mathurapur had unhygenic atmosphere and the water around the hill was polluted, who ever went around it was down with fever and other chronic stomach diseases. It was therefore called by the Assamese as Chir parbat or Koh-i-tap. While recording the death-toll, Talish says that even the grave diggers were not free from their job round the clock. Cloth for coffin became scanty. The dead bodies of hundreds and thousands people were lying in the fields and served as food to the vultures. Khwaja Bhur Mal, an imperial army officer was told by the Phukan that during this epidemic about two lakh eighty thousand Assamese died.⁴² During the same time food grains and other essential commodities became scarce, prices of wheat, cereals, tobacco, opium and salt etc. went up. Talish informs us that this was because of a severe famine but he does not mention the reason. Perhaps the reason of famine was the epidemic and large number of death toll and illness of the people. He gives the price list of the commodities and says that oil was selling at the rate of fourteen rupees per ser. Dal of Mash one rupee per Ser, Moong Dal ten rupees per Ser, one tolah of opium was available for one asharfi and one Ser salt for three rupees.

Even at this exorbitant rates things were not available. One of the reasons for the price-rise as Talish writes was the high handedness of the Chaukidars and the flight of the traders from the region. The Mughal camp was badly affected by the famine. Even Mir Jumla lived on Cereals, Curd and dry rice. Sometimes the Mughal army lived on the locally available vegetables. 43

One very striking reference which throws light on the character and personality of Mir Jumla as a commander and administrator is the general's instructions to the Mughal army officer after the conquest of Assam. Talish record this as follows

- 1) If any one from the Assamese soldier request for pardon, he should be excused and made a prisoner.
- 2) Nobody from the Mughal Camp should try to raise hand on the property, children or women of the Assamese.
- 3) They must restrain from plundering things.
- 4) Everyone from ordinary soldier to an officer of high rank must follow the instruction.

These instructions were already in practice from the day the Mughal army entered in Assam but Mir Jumla again reminded his people the day he entered the fort of Simlagarh. 44 Talish being a poet and man of letters while writing about these instructions expresses very powerfully his literary exhuberence while depicting the reactions of people of different nature in the Mughal Camp. Few instances will prove quite interesting.

He says that the men fond of Company and pleasure seeking started crying : 45

Since you entered the desert in search of Kabah,

If you are troubled by the thorns you should not cry.

The beautiful cheeks awaiting for the union said ;

O, those who run around the lanes of the beloved,

Be careful, the walls may break your head.

Those greedy people always thinking about wealth and treasure were compelled to lament ;

Donot stake your claim over the table of the time,

They have poisoned the food served over that.

Fathiyah Ibriyah as the above mentioned facts prove is a mine of information about Medieval Assam which has not yet been properly utilized. It is rather impossible here in a paper to examine them all. A careful study of this work is a great decideratum because the work is a long story of Mughal attraction in the North-East and the subsequent Ahom or Assamese repulsion. Neither the attraction nor the repulsion constitutes the whole story which

is interwoven in the accounts of Shihabuddin Talish. There can perhaps be no better principle for analysing this long story than Professor Butterfield's famous observation; "the historian seeks to explain how the past came to be turned into the present, but there is a very real sense in which the only explanation he can give is to unfold the whole story and to reveal the complexity by telling it in detail" 46

Notes & References

1. For English translation see, Raverty, London, 1881 and also Elliot and Dowson's History of India, Vol. II, Allahabad, 1969 (Reprint) p.p. 309-311.
2. Bibliotheca Indica, Calcutta, 1890 and also Elliot and Dowsom op. cit, vol. III.
3. 'Ain-i-Akbari, Vo. II H. Blochman's translation, Delhi, 1988 (Reprint);, pp. 130-31, Abul Fazl especially mentions that the people of Kamarup, "are good looking and addicted to the practice of magic"
4. Besides the above mentioned Persian sources Abdul Hamid Lahori's Padshah Namah Muhammad Kazim's 'Alamgir Namah, Mirza Nathan's Baharistan-i-Ghaybi and Riyaz-us-Salatin of Abdus Salam contains materials of considerable historical importance about the history and culture of Medieval Assam.
5. Shaykh Jalal-ud-Din Tabrezi came to Kamrup where Ibn Batulah met him, see F. A. Qadri Shaykh Jalal-ud-Din Tabrezi- a Suharwardi Saint in the North-East India. To be published in Islamic Studies Quarterly Journal of Islamic Research Institute, International Islamic University. Islamabad, Pakistan. Large number of warrior Saints also penetrated into Bengal and parts of Assam see F.A. Qadri Shaykh Jalal-ud-Din Mujarrad (d.1340) and the annexation of Sylhet to the Musliim Kingdom of Bengal Proceeding of North-East India History Association, Xth Session NEHU Shillong. 1989.
6. Sir J. N. Sarkar. Assam and the Ahoms in 1660 A.D. Journal of Bihar and Orissa Research Society Vol. I. Part II. 1915. p. 178.
7. Hermann Ethe. Bodlain Library Catalogue. No. 240.
8. Khuda Bakhsh Oriental Public Library. MSS. Nos. 573-75. For details see Descriptive Catalogue of the Library. Vol. VII. pp. 82-85 Patna. 1977. (Reprint).

9. Sir J. N. Sarkar is also of the same view. *Journal of Asiatic Society of Bengal* 1906. pp. 257-67 and 1907. pp. 405-25.
10. Charles Rieu. *British Museum Catalogue*. London. 1884. Vol. I. p. 266.
11. Hermann Ethe. *India Office Library. Catalogue*. No. 341-43 ; London. 1903.
- x2. Khuda Bakhsh O. P. Library, Patna, op. cit.
13. Vladimir Curzon concise *Descriptive Catalogue of Asiatic Society of Bengal*, Calcutta. 1924.
14. *History of India*. 5th Edition. p. 610.
15. *History of India*. Vol. VII. Allahabad. 1969 (Reprint) pp. 199. 265-69.
16. *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal*. Vol. XII. 1872. pp.75-84.
17. *Journal of Bihar and Orissa Research Society*. op. cit.
18. Mr. Addur Rahman. Edition of *Fathiyah Ibriyah* ; A 17th Century Persian Source about the Mughal Invasion of Assam. 1990.
19. Published at Calcutta. 1809 and the title is *Tarikh-i-Asham*.
20. Published at Paris. 1845.
21. *Journal of Bihar and Orissa Research Society*, op. cit, p. 181.
22. *Ibid*.
23. *Ibid*.
24. Gauhati, 1984 (Reprint).
25. N. N. Acharrya, op. cit(pp. 36-37.
26. *Ibid*(. p. 24.
27. Edward Gait on the authority of Kuch and Ahom Chronicles says that the name of the Raja of Kuch Bihar was Pran Narayan. not Bhim Narayan as mentioned by Talish, *A History of Assam*, Gauhati, 1984 (Reprint) p. x27 (f. n.)
28. *Holy Quran*, S. LVI : 17-25.
29. *Ibid*.
30. *Fathiyah Ibriyah*, edited text, op. cit, pp. 11-13,
31. *Ibid*.
32. *Ibid*, pp. 13-14.
33. *Ibid*, p. 16.

- 34 Edward Gait, op: cit, pp: 128-39.
- 35 Ibid
- 36 Journal of Bihar and Orissa Research Society, op: cit:
- 37 Edward Gait, op cit, pp. 141-51.
38. Fathiyah Ibriyah, edited text, op. cit. pp. 22-23.
39. Ibid. pp. 26-27.
40. Ibid. pp. 29-30.
41. Ibid p. 66.
42. Ibid. fp. 68.
43. Ibid. pp. 122-25.
44. Ibid. pp. 130-32.
45. Ib.d. p. 31.
46. Ibid. p. 32.