

A Glimpse of Indian Society in the Memoirs of Mughal Emperors Babur and Jahangir

Dr Seema Gautam *
Assistant Professor
Sahu Ram Swaroop Mahila Mahavidyalaya
Bareilly

Dr Deepak Singh
Assistant Professor
Swami Shukdevanand Mahavidyalaya
Shahjahanpur.

ABSTRACT

This paper analyses socio-cultural and economic notes spotted by Mughal kings Zahiruddin Muhammad Babur into memoirs called Baburnama and by Nuruddin Muhammad Jahangir in Tuzuk-i-Jahangiri. These rulers who were also great warriors and empire makers but also scholars endowed with literary sensibilities offer good dose of understanding on India's social, economical and cultural realities of their respective times. The first type of memoir Bâbur wrote in Chagatai Turkish which was later translated into Persian during Akbar's reign; Jahangir, Babur's great-grandson, wrote his memoir in Persian, the language of the Royal Court. The paper aims to compare and contrast their views about agriculture, trade, and industries in India by analysing their works. About the conditions of the country it is possible to say that Babur's observations, mostly concerning the agricultural and irrigation systems, plants and animals, give a rather rich picture of the land's potentiality in terms of natural resources though the data about the trade and industrial activities are left out. On the other hand, Jahangir gave detailed records about key cities of the empire such as Ahmedabad, Cambay, Burhanpur, Agra, and about the business growth of the regions, and being a native of Kashmir, the shawl industry of the Valley. The paper is also focused on the matter of the fact that Osborn and Harris narrate their stories in different ways. On the one hand, rather arranged by the territorial framework, Babur offers quantitative year correlations with regions emphasizing their violent conditions. On the other hand, rather placing more concern on the interaction of main political events with social and economic structures, Jahangir's descriptions intertwine his narrative. Reflecting the research imperative of this work, the reader is helped to expand the rather simplistic view of the Mughals as unadulterated plunderers and foreign invaders and instead view them as being attentive to the socio-economic realities of the country they occupied.

Keywords: *Mughal Memoirs, Baburnama, Tuzuk-i-Jahangiri, Socio-cultural Observations, Mughal Economic Insights.*

The Mughal princes of India and their relatives from Central Asia were not only great warriors and empire builders, but many of them also had refined literary tastes and an innate ability to

* Corresponding Author: Dr Seema Gautam

Email: seemagautam32@gmail.com

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critically evaluate the developments in the various regions around them – whether of political, military or socio-cultural importance. The Indian Mughal princes not only patronised great scholars and literary figures but were also authors of literary works and historical chronicles themselves. Two of them, Zahiruddin Muhammad Babur – the founder of the Mughal Empire in India – and his great-grandson and the fourth Mughal ruler of India – Nuruddin Muhammad Jahangir – did the extraordinary job of writing their own memoirs. Babur wrote it in his native language Chagatai Turkish, known as Tuzuk-i-Babur, Waqiyat-i-Babur or Babur Nama. This work was translated into Persian in 1589 - 90 AD by Abdul Rahim Khan-i-Khana, one of his Navaratnas or distinguished courtiers during the reign of the third Mughal emperor Akbar and has been used in the study. Jahangir, on the other hand, chose to write in Persian, which by this time had become the official language of the Mughal court. It is also known as Tuzuk-i-Jahangiri, Waqiyat-i Jahangiri or Jahangir Nama.

In these memoirs, both rulers have written their experiences and observations about the battlefield, political and diplomatic affairs, their public and personal lives and miscellaneous matters, but given the popular narrative that often describes the Mughals as foreign invaders, this research article explains Babur's and Jahangir's views about the socio-cultural condition of India in the light of their memoirs.

The Baburnama is broadly divided into three sections, which describe its author's experiences in Fargana, Kabul and Hindustan (India) respectively. The chapter on Hindustan has several subsections, namely "Defects of Hindustan" and "Advantages of Hindustan" which describe Babur's personal views about India. With regard to Tuzuk-i-Jahangiri, it can be said with certainty that it contains twice as much material as the Baburnama. But unlike his great-grandfather's narrative style, Jahangir's descriptions of India are scattered throughout the text of the memoir, which means that the Jahangir Nama discusses features of Indian society and culture as part of the main narrative concerning military and political events.

While giving details about the prevailing economic condition of India and its people regarding economy, trade and agriculture, Babur clearly writes that it is "full of people and produce" and has "stores of gold and silver", ¹ the Indian people carry on trade and commerce, but neither the source of these precious metals is mentioned nor the types of goods and merchandise manufactured and traded in India at that time are described. But Babur showed keen interest in understanding the agricultural system and irrigation methods prevalent in India.

For this he writes: “Autumn crops grow on their own from heavy rains; and strangely, spring crops grow even when there is no rain. Plants are irrigated with water brought in buckets or by wheelbarrows. They are irrigated continuously for two or three years; after which they do not need water. But some vegetables are watered regularly.”² He also gives a detailed description of the tools and equipment used by farmers to bring water from wells for irrigating their land and crops, especially in Lahore, Dipalpur, Agra, Chandawar and Bayana.³ At one place Babur mentions Indian flora and fauna and describes the qualities and characteristics of some famous Indian fruits, such as mango, banana, jackfruit, tamarind, mahua, date palm, palm etc.

He says that mango is a very popular fruit in India, but it cannot be preferred over melon. Banana is another Indian fruit that attracted Babur because he writes that it can be peeled easily, it has neither stone (seed) nor fibre inside and it grows on a plant which is "something between a grass and a tree." He also gives an interesting description of jackfruit, saying that "it looks like the stomach of a sheep."⁴

Although many industries of considerable importance had developed in India by the time Babur established his empire here, important among them were textiles, metal work, stone work, sugar, indigo processing and paper, but he does not mention them in his memoirs except for a few stones. He has not mentioned anything about the trade and commerce of that period, which was in a flourishing state.

On the other hand, Jahangir writes extensively about some of the major economic and commercial cities of India, such as Ahmedabad, Cambay, Burhanpur etc. He talks about the greatness and prosperity of Ahmedabad where at least 5,000 bankers or money changers transacted all over the country.⁵ According to Shirin Musavi, Agra was the most urbanised and largest city of the Mughal Empire, where the highest urban tax was collected, and Ahmedabad was second.⁶

Jahangir further states that Cambay was one of the largest ports of his empire, where to encourage trade, he first reduced the customs rate to 2.5% and later abolished it completely throughout his dominion.⁷ Musavi’s findings state that the third largest amount of urban tax collected in the Mughal Empire was from Cambay.⁸

Although Aparajita Ray, author of the introduction to David Pierce’s “Autobiographical Memoirs of Emperor Jahangir”, says that “Jahangir is silent about the extensive... shawl and carpet weaving industries”⁹, while recording a description of Kashmir, the emperor gives

detailed information about the different types of shawls produced in the region, the type of wool used in them and their importance.

“The Kashmiri shawl, which His Majesty Arsh-Ashyani [in reference to his father Akbar] called ‘Param-Narm’, is so famous that it needs no introduction. Another variety is ‘therma’, which is even softer. Another is ‘darma’ which is something like a quilted saddle cloth, which is spread over carpets,” Jahangir says, adding that the wool for the shawls comes from “a special goat found in Tibet.”¹⁰ Among agricultural products, Jahangir writes about the cultivation of saffron. “When the river reaches Pampur, ten kos [about 20 miles] from the city, it widens. All the saffron of Kashmir is produced here. It is not known if so much saffron is produced anywhere else in the whole world. Five hundred Indian maunds, which is equivalent to four thousand Persian maunds of saffron are produced each year... In some places the saffron fields extend for a kos [two miles], and in other places for half a kos.”¹¹

While describing the prevailing economic, trade and agricultural practices, both memoirs agree with each other in at least one aspect, i.e. both point towards the economic suffering and distress of the lower classes of the society. Regarding religious belief and social practices, both memoirs reveal that Indian society was composed of various religious, economic, ethnic and social groups, Babur gives very clear information about the social structure where he talks about the hereditary transmission of occupation but does not link it to any religious practice or belief.

“Another good thing in Hindustan is that there are innumerable and endless workers for every profession and skill. For every kind of work and everything there is a definite social group [possibly caste], which continues from their forefathers to sons,” Babur clearly writes about the caste system.¹²

While describing the major religious faith of India, Babur says that “most Hindus believe in the transmigration of souls.”¹³ But he does not shed light on the concept of transmigration in Hindu philosophy. Hinduism has been the dominant religion in India and over time various deities and sects emerged in it, but Babur hardly gives any information about the prevalent religious customs. During his stay in India, Sufi saints like Malik Muhammad Jayasi and Gauth Gwaliori enjoyed great influence among the masses, but Babur's memoirs only mention the dargahs of Sheikh Nizamuddin Auliya and Khwaja Qutbuddin. He writes that after his victory at Panipat in 1526, he came to Delhi and paid homage to their tombs but does not mention anything about their philosophy and popularity among the masses.

Meanwhile, Jahangir's description of various religions and sects is much more detailed than Babur's. He gives a detailed description of the division of profession according to birth, mentions the name of each caste, the duty and profession associated with them, and even says that each of them has a fixed day in the year for celebration.

Jahangir says that the first caste is the Brahmin, whose duty is "to acquire knowledge, to teach others, to worship the fire, to guide people to worship, to give something to the needy and to receive gifts" and that is their end. The month of Shravan and the festival of Raksha Bandhan are their special festivals. The second caste is the Kshatriya, whose duty is to protect the oppressed from the invasion of the tyrants and Vijayadashmi is their special festival. The third caste is the *Vaishya* and their work is to do farming, trade, make profits and take interest. Their special day is called Deepawali. The fourth caste is the Shudra, who is the lowest of the Hindu castes. They serve everyone and do not take part in anything related to other castes, and their festival is Holi.¹⁴ He also provides notable information about the concept of four stages of life in Hinduism, namely *Brahmacharya* (student life), *Grihastha* (family life), *Vanaprastha* (going to the forest for solitude), and *Sannyasa* (renunciation) - also known as the Ashrama system.

Jahangir also discusses the concept of incarnation of gods in various forms (called the Avtar system), but he does not seem to agree with this theory. He says that in one of his discussions with pandits (Hindu scholars) he also questioned the concept of Avtar system and said that "it is not proper to limit the divine to ten forms" because "in every religion there are people who perform miracles. They are different from other human beings of their time because of their knowledge and power."¹⁵

In addition, Jahangir's memoirs also mention many religious sites and holy places, such as Ujjain, Pushkar, Brindaban, Haridwar, the Jwalamukhi temple in Kangra. The emperor writes that apart from Hindus, "crowds of Muslim people travel long distances to make vows and seek blessings at the temple".¹⁶ He regularly engaged in philosophical discussions with scholars and preachers of all religions, and at one point he even praised Jadrup Gosain, a Hindu saint from Ujjain, for his knowledge and piety. "He is not deprived of learning and has studied well the teachings of Vedanta, which are similar to the knowledge of Sufism. I conversed with him for six gheri and he said so many good things that he made a very good impression on me. He even liked my company," Jahangir claims.¹⁷ But it is not clear from the memoirs whether his

attitude towards Sikhism and other views about non-Islamic beliefs was inspired by any fanatical spirit.

His hostility with the fifth Sikh Guru Arjun Dev and his torture and execution on his orders are well recorded in the annals of history. He alleges that the Sikh Guru's followers and devotees were "many simple-minded Indians", including "some ignorant, foolish Muslims."¹⁸ Even some Muslims like the Sufi saint Sheikh Ahmad Sirhindi were victims of Jahangir's wrath. He declared the Sufi saint a "heretic" and a traitor and arrested him. Ishwari Prasad rightly believes that given Jahangir's attitude towards different religions and his interactions with scholars, many "considered him a mockery of all religions after the fashion of Voltaire."¹⁹

Jahangir also mentions the practice of sati (widow burning), which he unsuccessfully tried to stop, but Babur does not mention this practice in his memoirs. "There is a custom prevalent among the Hindus whereby women burn themselves after the death of their husbands either for the sake of love or for the sake of their parents' honour and their own reputation,"²⁰ he writes describing this practice.

In terms of Indian dress and clothing, Babur describes the dhoti and sari worn by men and women in India, while Jahangir refers to the dress of priests and ascetics in North India and the common people in Kashmir. The Baburnama mentions: "The peasants and people of the lower classes go almost naked. They tie a thing called Languta, a modesty symbol hanging two spans below the navel. From this hanging modesty knot, another knot is passed between the [thighs] and tied at the back. (21) What is described above is a type of loincloth – a shorter version of the dhoti – which many male peasants in Northern India still wear. They do not cover the upper part of their bodies while working in the fields during the summer, so Babur writes that these peasants "remain almost naked." About the dress of women, he further writes: "The women also put on cloth; one half of which goes around the waist, the other is thrown over the head." Here Babur was of course referring to the sari - the most popular and common dress of Indian women. Indian women, especially in the western region, have also been wearing lehenga (long skirt) and choli (short shirt), but Babur either failed to notice this or did not find it worth discussing. The Tuzuk-i-Jahangiri also provides information about the dress and attire of his period – though the information is limited. While detailing the Ashrama system – the four stages of life according to Hindu religious texts – Jahangir also describes the dress worn by a Brahmin during various stages of his life.

During the Brahmacharya period he wears only a loincloth, sufficient to cover his modesty, and another piece of two or three yards of cotton which he throws over his back, apart from which he wears nothing else.²² Some ascetics also wore similar attire. Regarding Jadrup Gosain of Ujjain, Jahangir says that he was absolutely naked except for a piece of cloth which was on his “front and back”.²³

It is evident that this type of dress was not followed by the diverse people, but was confined only to the depraved or those who had renounced all worldly things in search of divine knowledge and salvation. Besides, Jahangir has also closely observed the culture and dressing style of the Kashmiri people and recorded it in his memoirs.

He says that woollen clothes were very common in Kashmir. Men and women used to wear woollen tunics, which they called "pattu". Kashmiris believed that if they did not wear tunics, the air would affect them, and it would become difficult for them to digest their food. Kashmiri men shaved their heads and wore round turbans, and common women did not wear clean clothes. They used the same tunic for three-four years, which they brought unwashed from the weavers' house and sewed it into a tunic, and did not wash it until it was torn to pieces.²⁴ Apart from these, Jahangir's memoirs are devoid of detailed and systematic descriptions of the dress of the time. The reason for this may be that the emperor, being already settled in India, did not find anything extraordinary in the dressing style of the common people of the country. But he must have noticed the distinctiveness in the dress of Kashmiris, Brahmins and Sanyasis which he has mentioned in his memoirs.

In conclusion, as far as Babur and Jahangir's views about Indian society and culture are concerned, it is notable that Babur does not offer any opinion about various religions, especially Hinduism. But Jahangir was critical of some aspects of Hindu religious belief, such as the doctrine of the incarnation of God. When it came to other aspects, especially the secular and non-religious aspects of society, Babur was sharply critical.

“Hindustan is a country of few attractions. Its people have no good looks; none of social intercourse, payments and meetings; none of talent and ability; none of manners; no form or uniformity, method or quality in handicrafts and work; “There are no good horses, no good dogs, no grapes, melons or top quality fruit, no ice or cold water, no good bread or cooked food in the markets, no hot baths, no colleges, no candles, torches or candlesticks,”²⁵ the founder of

the Mughal Empire wrote in his memoirs. But Jahangir appreciates India, especially its flora, fauna and its landscape. The emperor's memoirs also reveal his immense love for the land he rules. He appreciates the natural beauty of Kashmir²⁶ and the pleasant climate of Mandu²⁷.

While Jahangir feels a natural bond to the land of his birth, Babur sees himself as an “exile” from his native country. So, Lane Poole believes that “although he [Babur] conquered his new empire, he did not like it.”²⁸ A.L. Srivastava also writes that Babur looked at India “with the eyes of a conqueror.”²⁹ The only things Babur liked in India are described thus: “The pleasant things of Hindustan are that it is a large country, and it has deposits of gold and silver. Its air is very pleasant during the rains.”³⁰ Hence, Ishwari Prasad rightly remarks: “Unlike his great ancestor Babur, he [Jahangir] is a lover of things Indian, finding delight in Indian surroundings.”³¹

The lovely valley of Kashmir, with its luxuriant saffron fields and meadows, was an ever-enchanting land for the emperor. He loved spending summers in Kashmir, which he called “a garden of eternal spring, a delightful bed of flowers.”³²

Babur first invaded India in 1519 A.D. by capturing the fort of Bajaur and crossing Attock, and consolidated his hold over India and established an empire after his victory in the Battle of Panipat in 1526. But he lived a short life and died in 1530 A.D. Had he lived longer and seen more of its people and places, he might have revised his observations about India.

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