A CRITICAL STUDY OF MEDIÆVAL MUSLIM CHRONICLES

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The Muslim Chronicles of the Mediaeval Period in India throw a flood of light upon various aspects of social and economic life of the people. A careful and dispassionate study of the chronicles indicate how the Muslim writers of this period did not in any way attempt to glorify the rule of the Muslim kings to an inordinate extent and paint the condition of the Hindus in darker colour. Where praise was due, they were unstinted; where blame was necessary, they were not found wanting. Sir H. M. Elliot in his preface to the History of India as told by its own Historians, observes, “Of domestic history also we have in our Indian annalists absolutely nothing, and the same may be remarked of nearly all Muhammadan historians except Ibu Khalduv. By them society is never contemplated whether in its conventional usages or recognised privileges; its constituent elements or neutral relations; in its established classes or popular institutions; in its private recesses or habitual intercourses. In notices of commerce, agriculture, internal police, and local judicature, they are equally deficient. A fact, an anecdote, a speech, a remark, which would illustrate the condition of the common people, or of any rank subordinate to the highest, is considered too insignificant to be suffered to intrude upon a relation which concerns only grandees and ministers, thrones and imperial powers.” 1 It is difficult to agree with this view of Sir H.M. Elliot, as a critical study of such Muslim chronicles like Nuzhatu-l-Mushtak of Al-Idrisi, Futuhu-l-Buldan of Al Biladuri, Chach Nama of Muhammad Ali Kufi, Tabakati-Nasiri of Minhaju-s Siraj, Tarikh-i-Firoz Shahi of Barani and Shams-i-Siraj Aif, to mention only a few, convinces us how they did not fail to notice the life of the common people and how in certain respects, a high standard of administration was maintained by the Sultans of Delhi. An attempt is made in the following pages to sketch some of the most interesting observations of the Muslim Historians of India.

Character of the People

The Nuzhatu-l-Mushtak of Al-Idrisi written towards the end of the 11th century, makes an interesting observation of the character of the people in the country. “The Indians are naturally inclined to justice, and never depart from it in their actions. Their good faith, honesty, and fidelity to their engagements are well known, and they are so famous for these qualities...
that people flock to their country from every side: hence the country is flourishing and their condition prosperous. Among other characteristic marks of their love of truth and horror of vice, the following is related. When a man has a right to demand anything of another, and he happens to meet him, he has only to draw a circular line upon the ground and to make his debtor enter it, which the latter never fails to do, and the debtor cannot leave this circle without satisfying his creditor, or obtaining the remission of the debt."² Megasthenes and the Chinese pilgrims, Fa-hien and Yuan Chwang have paid great tribute to these high qualities of the people and it is refreshing to receive the same compliments from a Muslim traveller, who had travelled extensively in Europe.

_Liberal Outlook of Arab Rule in Sind_

The _Futuhul-Buldan_ of Al-Biladuri written in the middle of the 9th century A.D. and the _Chach Nama_ of Muhammad Ali Kufi throw a good deal of light upon the progressive rule of the Arabs in Sind. It is true that they had a political motive in basing their rule upon liberal principles. Sir Wolseley Haig rightly observes that Imaduddin Muhammad’s campaign in Sind “was not a holy war, waged for the propagation of the faith, but a mere war of conquest, and it was undoubtedly politic in the leader of a few thousand Arabs to refrain from a course which might have roused swarms of idolaters against him.”³ Still we cannot but admire their remarkable way of understanding things in their right perspective and in a practical manner, although the greatest of imperial powers even after three centuries of contact with the country is utterly lacking in imagination. The statement of Hajjaj, “the temples shall be unto us, like as the Churches of the Christians, the Synagogue of the Jews, and the fire temples of the Magians”, as recorded by Al Biladuri should be written in golden letters. Similarly the _Chach Nama_ mentions that Hajjaj gave instructions to Muhammad to allow the people of Brahmanabad to practise their own religion unmolested. It runs thus:—“It appears that the chief inhabitants of Brahmanabad had petitioned to be allowed to repair the temple of Budh and pursue their religion. As they have made submission and have agreed to pay taxes to the Khalifa, nothing more can be properly required from them. They have been taken under our protection, and we cannot in any way stretch out our hands upon their lives or property. Permission is given them to worship their Gods. Nobody must be forbidden or prevented from following his own religion. They may live in their houses in whatever manner they like.”⁴ There was no idea of exploitation and all classes of people were assured of their living. “Protection was given to artizans, the merchants and the common people and those who had been seized from those classes were all
liberated” (Chach Nama). In order to reconcile the people to his rule, Muhammad “appointed people from among the villagers and the chief citizens to collect the fixed taxes from the cities and villages, that there might be a feeling of strength and protection.” The Brahmans especially were shown special favour and we learn that “they were protected against opposition and violence. Each of them was entrusted with an office, for Kasim was confident that they would not be inclined to dishonesty.” If only this noble example of the Arabs had been followed by their successors, who ruled one after another, the history of India would have been entirely different. In regard to the collection of revenue, the Brahmans who were appointed revenue managers were thus instructed. “Deal honestly between the people and the Sultan, and if distribution is required make it with equity and fix the revenue according to the ability to pay. Be in concord among yourselves, and oppose not each other, so that the country may not be distressed.” It was also enjoined that “the artizans and merchants were not to be heavily taxed. Whosoever took great pains in his work or cultivation was to be encouraged and supported.” The people also deserved well of this kind treatment. They offered their submission and willingly acquiesced in the rule of their new masters. They presented a memorandum in the following terms: “The dominion of this world is no one’s property. When the army of God’s destiny comes forth from behind the veil of secrecy, it deprives some kings of their thrones and crowns, and drives others to despair and flight, by change of circumstances and the occurrence of calamities. No dependence can be placed upon either old sovereignty or new authority which are fleeting possessions. We now come submissively to you, confiding in your just equity. We put ourselves under your yoke.” Trust begets trust and there was good-will and cordial understanding between the ruler and the ruled. The value of the Muslim Chronicles, in sketching this aspect of Arab rule in Sind, cannot be underestimated.

Mahmud of Ghazni’s Fame

Similarly, the Muslim Chronicles testify that Mahmud of Ghazni was no mere invader or plunderer. So far as India was concerned, he was primarily interested in carrying away a large booty and enriching his own country. His father, Amir Subuktigin, according to the Tabakat-i Nosiri of Minhajus Siraj, is spoken as “a wise, just, brave and religious man, faithful to his agreements, truthful in his words and not avaricious for wealth. He was kind and just to his subjects, and the Almighty God had bestowed upon him all the great qualities which are admirable in nobles and princes.” Firishtha describes the brilliant achievements of Mahmud and his account is undoubtedly authoritative as he had direct access to a number of original works,
which are unfortunately lost to us. After sketching the invasions of the Sultan, Firishta mentions that “the King on his return, ordered a magnificent Mosque to be built of marble and granite, of such beauty as struck any beholder with astonishment and furnished it with rich carpets and with candleabras and other ornaments of silver and gold. This Mosque was universally known by the name of the Celestial Bride. In its neighbourhood the King founded an University, supplied with a vast collection of curious books in various languages. It contained also a Museum of natural curiosities. For the maintenance of this establishment he appropriated a large sum of money, besides a sufficient fund for the maintenance of the students, and proper persons to instruct youths in the arts and sciences.”

High Qualities of the Sultans

We are struck with the benevolent rule of the Sultans of Delhi ever since the foundation of Muslim power in India (1206 A.D). Almost all the contemporary Muslim Chronicles praise the beneficial rule of the Sultans and they pay a high compliment to some of their personal qualities. It does not mean that they sketch merely the bright aspect of their rule. Many of them criticise boldly some of the measures of the Sultans, which affected the well-being of the people. But on a careful perusal of their accounts, we cannot but admit that they were marked by certain great traits. Speaking of Muhammad Ghori, Firishta mentions that he “bore the character of a just monarch, fearing God and ever having the good of his subjects at heart. He paid great attention to learned and devout men, and was never deficient in serving them to the utmost of his power.” The Tajul-Maasir of Hasan Nizami praises Kutbuddin’s justice, encouragement of the learned and civil administration. He administered justice with so much impartiality that “the wolf and sheep drank water out of the same pond.” The Tabakat-i-Nasiri of Minhajus-Siraj in describing the rule of Altamish states, “It is firmly believed that no king so benevolent, so sympathising and so respectful to the learned and to elders as he was, ever rose by his native energy to the cradle of empire.” From the same author, we learn that “Sultan Razia was a great monarch. She was wise, just, and generous, a benefactor to her kingdom, a dispenser of justice, the protector of her subjects and the leader of her armies. She was endowed with all the qualities befitting a king, but she was not born of the right sex, and so in the estimation of men all these virtues were worthless. (May God have mercy on her).” Nasiruddin was a very virtuous and pious ruler and he was regarded as a saint on the throne. The Tariikh-i-Firozshahi of Barani describes him as a mild, kind and devout king and passed much of his time in making copies of the Holy Book.” The reign of Balban was a very spirited one and all
accounts agree that he restored order in the Kingdom and set up a firm administration. The *Tarikh-i-Firozshahi* of Barani is invaluable to us in this respect. Balban’s efficient rule is thus described: “From being a *Malik* he became a *Khan* and from being a *Khan* he became King. When he attained the throne he imparted to it new lustre, he brought the administration into order, and restored to efficiency institutions whose power had been shaken or destroyed. The dignity and authority of government was restored; and his stringent rules and resolute determination caused all men, high and low, throughout his dominions, to submit to his authority. Fear and awe of him took possession of all men’s hearts, but his justice and consideration for his people won the favour of his subjects and made them zealous supporters of his throne.”\(^{18}\) He maintained the dignity of his position and the splendour of the royal court attracted the attention of all classes of people. “In the first and second year he assumed great state, and made great display of his pomp and dignity… Musalmans and Hindus would come from distances of one or two hundred *Kos* to see the splendour of his equipage, which filled them with amazement. . . . No sovereign had ever before exhibited such pomp and grandeur in Delhi… For the twenty-two years that Balban reigned he maintained the dignity, honour and majesty of the throne in a manner that could not be surpassed.”\(^{19}\) His administration of justice was remarkable and it set a noble example to his successors. As Barani says, “In the administration of justice he was inflexible, showing no favour to his brethren or children, to his associates or attendants; and if any of them committed an act of injustice he never failed to give redress and comfort to the injured person. No man dared to be too severe to his slaves or handmaids, to his horsemen or his footmen.”\(^{20}\)

**Alaudin’s Ideal of Kingship**

The *Tarikh-i-Firozshahi* of Barani gives a detailed account of Alaudin’s ideal of kingship. Although a stern despot, Alaudin based his rule upon the general well-being of the people. He was not guided blindly by the so-called injunctions of Islam, as interpreted by the Muselman clergy. The successful manner in which he controlled prices of all commodities in the market and the excellent arrangements which he made for an equal distribution of these commodities to all classes of people act as a beaconlight to the scheme of rationing, which is undertaken by the Government of India to-day on a vast scale. As Barani observes, “Royal commands belong to the king, legal decrees rest upon the judgment of *Kazis* and *Mufsis*. In accordance with this opinion whatever affairs of state came before him, he only looked to the public good, without considering whether his mode or dealing with it was lawful or unlawful. He never asked for legal opinions about
political matters, and very few learned men visited him.” In an interesting discussion with the Qazi, the Sultan clearly revealed his mind, “Although I have not studied the Science or the Book, I am a Musalman of a Musalman stock. To prevent rebellion, in which thousands perish, I issue such orders as I conceive to be for the good of the State and the benefit of the people. Men are heedless, disrespectful and disobey my commands: I am then compelled to be severe to bring them into obedience. I do not know whether this is lawful or unlawful, whatever I think to be for the good of the state or suitable for the emergency, that I decree...” As Prof. Habib observes, “the outlook of the age was essentially secular. Religion was a warcry and nothing more.”

**Muhammad Tughlak an Enigma**

Prof. Agha Mahdi Husain has done great service by making a critical study of the life and activities of Muhammad Tughlak. Barani and Ibn Batuta are our main source for the history of this remarkable ruler, “who was an enigma to Barani, an enemy of Islam and friend of Hinduism to Isami and a mixture of opposites and a freak of nature to others.” Barani pays a high compliment to the scholarship of the Sultan. “In the calligraphy of books and letters Sultan Muhammad abashed the most accomplished scribes. The excellence of his handwriting, the ease of his composition, the sublimity of his style, and the play of his fancy, left the most accomplished teachers and professors far behind. He was an adept in the use of his metaphor... He knew by heart a good deal of Persian poetry.” The deficiency in the character of the Sultan is not left unnoticed by Barani. “The punishment of Munalsans and the execution of true believers with him became a practice and a passion. Numbers of doctors, and elders, and Saiyids, and Sufis, and Kalandars, and clerks and soldiers, received punishment by his order. Not a day or week passed without the spilling of much Musulman blood, and the running of streams of gore before the entrance of his palace.” An unbiased judgment of the character of Muhammad is given by Barani. “He is represented by contemporaries as one of the wonders of the age in which he lived, from his possessing in so eminent a degree, qualities and accomplishments so opposite. He even wished to unite in his own person the duties of a monarch with those of a high priest. He was always regular at his own daily prayers and punished those persons who neglected theirs. He abstained from fornication, drunkenness, and other vices forbidden by the Holy Book.” Ibn Batuta, a great Muslim theologian of Morocco, who had a great desire to make the pilgrimage to Mecca and the holy places of his faith, visited the court of Muhammad Tughluk and received much patronage from the Sultan. The account of his travels in Asia and Africa (1325-1354) is a mine
of information and it shows to what an extent the Islamic civilization had made itself felt in various directions. As Gibb observes, "Of the multitudes that crowd upon the stage in the pageant of mediæval Islam there is no figure more instinct with life than his. In his book he not only lays before us a faithful portrait of himself with all his virtues and failings, but evokes a whole age as it were from the dead." It is pleasing to learn from Ibn Batuta that in all the Muslim countries which he visited there were rest-houses and hospices and he was hospitably welcomed and entertained out of endowments created by generations of benefactors. Throughout the Middle Ages the trade routes of Africa and Asia and the sea-borne trade of the Indian Ocean were almost exclusively in the hands of the Muslim merchants. The travels of Ibn Batuta are but one of many sources which reveal how widespread were their activities and we get a descriptive account of Muhammadan society in the second quarter of the fourteenth century. Speaking of Damascus, Ibn Batuta mentions that "The variety and expenditure of the religious endowments at Damascus are beyond computation. There are endowments in aid of persons who cannot undertake the pilgrimage to Mecca out of which are paid the expenses of those who go in their stead. There are other endowments for supplying wedding outfits to girls whose families are unable to provide them, and others for the freeing of prisoners. There are endowments for travellers out of the revenues of which they are given food, clothing and the expenses of conveyance to their countries. Then there are endowments for the improvement and paving of the streets, because all the lanes in Damascus have pavements on either side, on which the foot passengers walk, while those who ride use the roadway in the centre. Besides these there are endowments for other charitable purposes." The duty laid upon every Muslim of visiting Mecca at least once in his lifetime, so long as it lies within his power to do so, has been in all ages a stimulus to travel, far greater in degree than the stimulus of Christian pilgrimage in the Middle Ages. There is no doubt that Ibn Batuta had very keen powers of observation and in all the countries which he visited, he gives a number of details concerning the day-to-day activities of the people. Speaking of the Meccans, we are given to understand that they "are very elegant and clean in their dress, and most of them wear white garments which you always see fresh and snowy. They use a great deal of perfume and Kohl and make free use of toothpicks of green arakwood. The Meccan women are extraordinarily beautiful and very pious and modest. They too make use of perfumes to such a degere that they will spend the night hungry in order to buy perfumes with the price of their food. They visit the mosque every Thursday night, wearing their finest apparel; and the whole sanctuary is saturated
with the smell of their perfume." Ibn Batuta was very much impressed with the organization of the postal service in India, the customs regulation and the rigorous examination which foreigners had to undergo when entering the country. The Sultan had a great fascination for foreigners and Ibn Batuta did not fail to notice this. "The king of India, Sultan Muhammad Shah, makes a practice of honouring strangers and distinguishing them by governorships or high dignities of state. The majority of his courtiers, palace officials, ministers of State, judges and relatives by marriage are foreigners and he has issued a decree that foreigners are to be given in his country the title of Aziz (Honourable) so that this has become a proper name for them." To what an extent the Sultan had a high sense of justice is indicated by an incident related by Ibn Batuta. "One of the Indian nobles claimed that the Sultan had put his brother to death without cause and cited him before the Qadi. The Sultan walked on foot and unarmed to the Qadi's tribunal, saluted him and made obeisance having previously commanded the Qadi not to rise before him or move when he entered his court, and remained standing before him. The Qadi gave judgment against the Sultan to the effect that he must give satisfaction to his adversary for the blood of his brother and he did so. At another time a certain Muslim claimed that the Sultan owed him a sum of money. They carried the matter before the Qadi, who gave judgment against the Sultan for the payment of the debt and he paid it." Dr. Mahdi Hasain gives an unbiased and balanced view of the reign of the Sultan. "But the verdict of history is that he was neither visionary nor impractical, nor inherently unsound, nor his grandiose schemes beyond the range of human possibility. He was far in advance of his age, and could not, like a modern Government, exploit religion, which he should have left to itself, if he wanted to rule successfully. He roused the opposition of the Ulama and in his attempt to reform them he not only paralysed the right arm of the State, but raked up hostilities, before which he succumbed and his imperialism perished."

A New Ethico-Islamic State

We are greatly indebted to Shams-i-Siraj Afif, who was attached to the court of Firoz, for his interesting account of the orthodox rule of Firoz Shah, who was of a merciful and pious disposition and who possessed "the milk of human kindness, that supreme gift of sympathy and tenderness which made the whole Indian world his kin." His reign marks the beginning of that religious reaction which became a prominent feature of his administrative policy. The theocratic principles of the Quran were adopted in Government and the Holy Law was observed with great strictness. According to Shams-i-Siraj Afif, Firoz had no desire to accept the throne, but to
make a pilgrimage to Mecca. When compelled by the nobles and all classes of people to do so, Firoz Shah appealed to the Almighty to give him the necessary strength to bear this heavy responsibility. "O Lord! the stability of states, the place, regulation and occupations of governments do not depend upon man. Permanence of dominion depends upon Thy behests, Oh God! Thou art my refuge and my strength." His paternal rule has been described by historians, but what is specially interesting is "the re-emergence of the religious spirit that hovered over kingship, politics and statecraft". The Jeziya or poll-tax was reimposed upon the Brahmins and the laws of the Prophet became his guide, "acting zealously upon the principles they laid down and prohibiting all that was inconsistent therewith." The Futhhat-i Firozshahi written by the Sultan himself is a mere brochure of thirty-two pages. "It exhibits the humane and generous spirit of Firoz in a very pleasing unostentatious light, recording his earnest endeavours to discharge the duties of his station with clemency, and to act up to the teaching of his religion with reverence and earnestness." The Sultan had the maxim that "Whoever transgressed the Law should receive the punishment prescribed by the book and the decrees of judges." Heretics and sectarians, who laboured to seduce the people into heresy and schism were suppressed. Atheism was stamped out and all mystic practices curbed. A pernicious custom, as described by the Sultan, was put down. "A custom and practice unauthorized by the Law of Islam had sprung up in Musulman cities. On holy days women riding in palankins, or carts, or litters, or mounted on horses or mules, or in large parties on foot went out of the city to the tombs. Rakes and wild fellows of unbridled passions and loose habits, took the opportunity which this practice afforded for improper riotous action. I commanded that no woman should go out to the tombs under pain of exemplary punishment. Now, thanks to the great God, no lady or respectable Musulman woman can go out on pilgrimage to the tombs. The practice has been entirely stopped." 

Conclusion

A careful review of the Muslim Chronicles of Mediaeval India enables us to make a comprehensive study of the rule of the Sultans of Delhi. They sketch not merely their autocratic rule but how underlying this autocracy there were certain principles governing the State. With the definite establishment of the Sultanate of Delhi in 1206, we notice that a strong and efficient system of government was the sine qua non of the State. Peace and order were maintained and the happiness of the people was not neglected. The Tabakt-i-Nasiri, Tarikh-i-Firozshahi of Barani and Shams-i-Siraj Afl and the account of Ibn Batuta clearly reveal how in certain respects, the
experiments of the Sultans regulating the life of the common people bordered on socialistic principles and how, even in times of crisis and internal disorder, the life of the masses went on smoothly. It is this aspect of Muslim rule that is worthy of our attention and the chronicles, of which only a cursory review has been made, are very valuable from this point of view.

REFERENCES

22. E. & D., Vol. III, p. 188.
34. Lane Poole, *Medieval India*, p. 140.