

Brief Lives of Classical Muslim Historians of the Subcontinent

By Muhammad Mojlum Khan

Some of the leading Muslim historians of medieval India were Sadr al-Din Hasan Nizami, Rashid al-Din Fazlullah, Abdul Malik Isami, Zia al-Din Barani, Abul Fadl and Abdul Qadir Badauni. An attempt will be made here to briefly highlight their lives and works for the benefit of those who are unable to access original Arabic, Persian, Turkish, Urdu, Hindi and Bengali writings.

Not much is known about Sadr al-Din Hasan Nizami's life and family background although according to some historians he hailed from Nishapur and his family may have been in the service of the Ghurid rulers. His father's name was Nizami Aruzi Samarqandi, who was author of *Chahar Maqala* and a friend of Umar Khayyam, a renowned Persian poet and astronomer. Following in the footsteps of his father, Hasan Nizami became a prominent writer and historian. He was the author of *Tajul Ma'asir*, the first official history of Delhi Sultanate. A master of Persian prose, Hasan Nizami's work was the earliest historical work to have been produced in India. It begins with the Battle of Tarain in 1191 and concludes with the establishment of Sultanate rule during the reign of Sultan Shams al-Din Iltutmish in 1229. For some reason, Hasan Nizami makes no reference to the Muslim conquest of Bengal around 1205 under the leadership of Muhammad Bakhtiyar Khalji, perhaps he did not have access to sufficient information to be able to write about the conquest.

Like Hasan Nizami, Rashid al-Din Fazlullah, also known as Rashid al-Din Tabib, also hailed from Persia and was of Jewish origin. He grew up in Hamadan and was known to have been a gifted student. A physician by training, he also became a notable writer

and historian, compiling his *Jami' ut Tawarikh*, a monumental work of universal history in around 1307. By contrast, Abdul Malik Isami belonged to a noble Arab family and they came to India during the time of Sultan Iltutmish (1210-1236). Brought up and educated under the tutelage of his grandfather, Izz al-Din Isami, who was in the service of the Delhi Sultans, young Rashid became well-versed in Persian language, literature and history. He is known for his *Futuh us-Salatin*, a versified history of Muslim rule from the time of Sultan Mahmud of Ghazna to the final days of Muhammad ibn Tughlaq's reign. It took him only six months to complete the work and he dedicated it to Sultan Ala al-Din Hasan Shah, who was the founder of the Bahmani dynasty.

Among the early Muslim historians of the Subcontinent, Zia al-Din Barani is an important figure. He was born in 1285 into a well-known Muslim family whose members served the Sultans of Delhi with loyalty and dedication. He followed in their footsteps and became a close companion of Muhammad ibn Tughlaq. After the latter was deposed, he fell out of favour with the ruling elites and died in difficult circumstances in 1357. However, he is famous for his *Tarikh-i-Firuz Shahi*, a historical account of Delhi Sultanate up to the reign of Sultan Firuz Shah Tughlaq. Referring to his *Tarikh*, Barani wrote, 'This is a work of solid worth which combines several virtues. If you consider it a history, you will find in it an account of kings and *maliks*. If you search in this book for laws, government regulations and administrative affairs, you will not find it without them. If you want precepts and advice for kings and rulers, you will find them more plentiful and better presented in this book than in any other. And because everything I have written is true and correct, this history is worthy of credence. Also as I have put a lot of meaning in very few words, the example of mine deserves to be followed.' (*Tarikh-i-Firuz Shahi* quoted by Nizami, p124) If Barani's assessment of the value and significance of his *Tarikh* is somewhat exaggerated, what is beyond doubt is that it later became an important source of information for many other scholars and historians of India including Badauni, Ferishta, Dabir and Abdul Haq Dehlvi.

Like Barani, Abul Fadl (Abul Fazl) was a great historian of Muslim India. Also known as Abul Fadl Allami, some historians consider him to be the doyen of Persian chroniclers. Of Yemeni origin, it was his grandfather, Shaykh Khidr, who moved

from Sind and settled in Nagaur, close to the Sufi centre of Hamid al-Din Sufi, who was a prominent disciple of Khwajah Mu‘in al-Din Chishti of Ajmer, the founder of the famous Chishtiyah Tariqah. Trained in Arabic and Persian, he was regarded as an outstanding scholar especially known for his mastery of Arabic thought and philosophy. His father, Shaykh Mubarak, was a notable scholar who clearly inspired him to pursue scholarly activities. Luckily, in Akbar, the great Mughal emperor, Abul Fadl found a friend and supporter who encouraged him to do just that. In Abul Fadl’s own words, ‘I was sick of the learned of my own land, my brother and other relatives then advised me to attend the Court, hoping that I would find in the Emperor a leader to the sublime world of thought. In vain did I at first resist their admonitions. Happy, indeed, am I now that I have found in my sovereign a guide to the world of action and a comforter in lonely retirement; in him meet my longing after faith and my desire to do my appointed work in the world; he is the orient where the light of form and ideal dawns; and it is he who has taught me that the work of the world, multifarious as it is, may yet harmonize with the spiritual unity of truth.’ (*Akbarnamah* quoted by K. A. Nizami, p141)

Under Akbar’s patronage, Abul Fadl composed several historical works. However, his most important contributions were *Akbarnamah* and *Ain-i-Akbari*. The former is a detailed account of the life and works of Emperor Akbar which took him seven years to complete. According to Khaliq Ahmad Nizami, a leading historian of medieval India, ‘Since political background alone could not do justice to Akbar’s multi-faced personality, Abul Fazl prepared a broad canvas on which to draw the Emperor’s sketch. He blended religion, politics and society in one complex whole and made it rotate around the person of the king.’ (Ibid, p150) If the *Akbarnamah* is an invaluable study of the reign of Emperor Akbar, then *Ain-i-Akbari* is an important record of Mughal administration during the time of the same ruler. Although historians have rightly criticised certain aspects of Abul Fadl’s methodology and style of writing, yet, at the same time, he is considered to be one of the greatest historians of India. In the words of Henry Beveridge, the British translator of *Akbarnamah*, ‘...[Abul Fadl] was an unwearied worker, and when we blame him and lament his deficiencies we shall do well to consider, what a blank our knowledge of Akbar’s reign would have been, had not Abul Fazl exerted himself during years of strenuous effort to chronicle events

and institutions. His work has also the imperishable merit of being a record by a contemporary and one who had access to information at first hand.’ (vol. 1, p1)

Like Barani and Abul Fadl, Mulla Abd al-Qadir Badauni was another important historian of medieval India. Born around 1540, he grew up in Sambhal and Agra, and later moved to Badaun in Uttar Pradesh when he was in his mid-twenties. Though he served in the administration of Akbar, he was very critical of the latter’s religious reforms; Badauni was a strictly orthodox Muslim. His most notable work was *Muntakhab-ut-Tawarikh* which he completed in 1595. Consisting of three volumes, this work surveys Muslim rule and administration in India. The first volume covers the periods of Babar and Humayun, the founders of Mughal dynasty, while volume two is devoted entirely to the reign of Emperor Akbar up to 1595. The third volume includes useful and informative biographical sketches of notable Muslim figures of the time including writers, scholars and poets. In addition to the above, Badauni composed several other works such as a summary of Rashid al-Din Fazlullah’s *Jami’ ut Tawarikh*. He also translated the *Ramayana* and *Mohabharata*, two classical Hindu epics among others. He died in 1615.

In part two of this article, an attempt will be made to survey the life and works of Minhaj al-Din Siraj who was an outstanding medieval scholar of India and a classical historian of Muslim Bengal.

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