

Ghulam Husain Salim

Great Historian of Medieval Bengal

By Muhammad Mojlum Khan

If Sadr al-Jahan Minhaj al-Din Siraj Jurjani (Minhaj-i-Siraj), author of the celebrated *Tabaqat-i-Nasiri* (Chronicle of Nasir) was the classical historian of Bengal, then Ghulam Husain Salim Zaidpuri must be considered an outstanding pre-modern Muslim historian of Bengal. According to Ilahi Bakhsh, the author of *Khurshid Jahan Namah*, Ghulam Husain was born in the village of Zaidpur in Oudh (Indian State of Uttar Pardesh); his exact date of birth is not known. He may have completed his early education in his local village before moving to Maldah (located in present-day Indian State of West Bengal).

He would have studied the standard curriculum of the day which included Persian, Arabic, Urdu, Islamic studies and Bengali during his early years before pursuing his intermediate studies. After completing his formal education, Ghulam Husain obtained employment as a Postmaster (Dak Munshi) in Maldah under the patronage of Mr George Udny, who was a notable official of the East India Company. Perhaps he was the Commercial Director of the Company's factory at Maldah. Ghulam Husain's linguistic skills clearly impressed Udny who encouraged him to undertake necessary research before completing his celebrated *Riyazu-s-Salatin*.

Riyaz is the plural of Persian 'Rauzah' which means 'garden' while Salatin means 'kings'. Thus *Riyazu-s-Salatin* means 'gardens of kings'. In his Introduction to *Riyaz*, Ghulam Husain explained at some length why he wrote this book:

‘After God’s and the Prophet’s praise, this humble servant who is hopeful of the intercession of the Prophet, namely, Ghulam Husain... says that since some period, according to chances of time, he has been in the service of Mr. George Udny, who is a gentleman of high position and high rank, of graceful character, of kind heart, mild disposition, praiseworthy deportment and great generosity, who is the Hatim of the world of bounty, the Naushirwan of the world of Justice, the Generous man of the age, and who is callous about popularity and praise...

‘Inasmuch as his high mind is always pursuant of the study of histories and travels, and is seeker of all sorts of knowledge and accomplishments, in the year 1200 A. H. corresponding to 1789 A. C., his bent of noble mind turned towards seeking a knowledge of the lives and careers of past sovereigns and rulers who unfurling the standard of sovereignty over Bengal, the Paradise of Provinces, have now passed into the secret of regions of Eternity. Accordingly, the order was given to this man of poor ability, that whatever he might gather from historical works, etc, he should compile in simple language, so that it might be intelligible to all, and might deserve the approval of the elite. This ignorant man, of limited capacity, deeming the execution of the order of his master incumbent on himself, being the slave of order, has placed the finger of consent on the eye, and girded up the loin of effort and venture, collected sentence after sentence from every source, and for a period of two years has devoted himself to the compilation and preparation of this history. And after completing it, he has named it *Riyazu-s-Salatin*, according to the date of its completion. It is hoped that this work may merit the approval of all persons of light.’ (pp2-4)

Originally written in Persian, the *Riyaz* consists of an introduction and four parts. The introduction is divided into four sections, describing the people of Bengal, history of this region, its geography, environment, living condition and nature of cities and towns, and brief sketch of Hindu rule in Bengal. By contrast, part one of the book provides an overview of the early phase of Muslim rule in Bengal. Part two covers the Sultanate rule in Bengal while part three describes Muslim rule during the Mughal period. Part four of the book is divided into two sections: first section describes the arrival of the European powers in Bengal including Portuguese, Dutch and French, while the second describes the emergence of British in Bengal.

Unfortunately, Ghulam Husain does not mention his sources of information but a careful reading of the *Riyaz* shows that he had access to some standard Persian works on history including *Tabaqat-i-Nasiri* of Minhaj al-Din Siraj, *Tarikh-i-Firuzshahi* of Shams-i-Siraj Afif and Zia al-Din Barani, *Ain-i-Akbari* and *Akbarnamah* of Abul Fadl, who was the famous courtier of Emperor Akbar, *Muntakhab-i-Tawarikh* of Abdul Qadir Badauni, *Tarikh* of Firishta and *Tabaqat-i-Akbari* of Nizamuddin Ahmad among others. He clearly had access to other sources to which he frequently referred including a book by one Haji Muhammad Qandahar. According to Abdus Salam, the translator of *Riyaz*, Ghulam Husain ‘appears also to have taken considerable pains in deciphering old inscriptions on monuments, mosques, and shrines in Gaur and Panduah – old Musalman capitals of Bengal. This feature considerably enhances the value of his history, and gives it superiority over other similar works, and places our author in the forefront of Bengal antiquarians and researchers.’ (p5)

According to Abdul Karim, author of *Banglar Itihas* and leading historian of Bengal, ‘The greatness of Ghulam Husain Salim is that he is pre-eminently a historian of Muslim Bengal. Before him historians dealt with the history of limited periods or particular aspects of the history, but Ghulam Husain’s narrative comprise the history from the Muslim conquest of Bengal down to the beginning of British rule and a little after...But for this book, modern historians would have found it difficult to construct a correct framework of the history of Muslim rule in Bengal.’ (Entry on *Tabaqat-i-Nasiri* in Banglapedia)

The value of *Riyaz* is such that Professor Blochmann, a leading Oriental scholar, wrote ‘The *Riyaz* is much prized as being the fullest account in Persian of the Muhammadan History of Bengal which the author brings down to his own time (1786-88).’ Unsurprisingly, Captain Charles Stewart’s *History of Bengal* (1813) was based on Ghulam Husain’s *Riyaz*. This was no mean achievement on Ghulam Husain’s part as Captain Stewart is considered to be the first modern historian of Bengal. The author of *Riyaz* died in 1817 and was buried in Chak Qurban Ali locality in Maldah. Given the importance of this book, the Asiatic Society of Bengal requested Abdus Salam, a noted Muslim scholar of Bengal, to translate it into English. He accomplished this task in 1903, adding extensive footnotes based on original Persian and modern sources, thus enhancing the value of this book. Abdus Salam carried out

this important task in order to ‘awaken amongst my co-religionists in Bengal an enlightened consciousness of their historic past, coupled with an earnest longing in the present to avail themselves of the opportunity afforded by a progressive and beneficent Government for their future social and intellectual regeneration; and also if they widen the mutual sympathies of the two great nationalities in Bengal by infusing sentiments of closer and more cordial comradeship, in that they have been fellow-travellers over the same tract for many long centuries; and last, though not least, if they evoke the sympathetic interest of Englishmen in the fate of a great and historic community that preceded them for six centuries in the Government of this country.’
(p.ii)

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