

## Badauni as a Source for Interpreting the History of Akbar's Period: A Critical Review of the *Muntakhab-ut-Tawarikh* and *Najat-ur-Rashid*

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### Introduction

“Among the branches of knowledge, history is a noble science and an instructive art”<sup>1</sup>  
-Badauni

The ‘Age of Akbar’ was not only prolific in historical literature; it also registered a definite advance in medieval historiographical traditions. It studied the historical landscape from different angles and reflected diverse points of view- imperial, sectarian and feminine. It also represented the Persian language in its various forms of prose and verse. The historical literature of this time also sought to weave medieval Indian history in the broad pattern of Indian history and tried to look upon Indian culture in totality. It tried to analyse Muslim contribution to cultural life as part and parcel of this historical legacy. Histories written during Akbar's reign also made new experiments in chronology by adopting the death of the Prophet (*rihlat*) as the new beginning in the Islamic calendar, in preference to the well-established *hijri* era. Thus, the data that was collected reflected large-scale cooperation of different categories of individuals- the high and low, princes and plebeians, rulers and ruled.<sup>2</sup>

History writing of the period also showcased a new attempt at preparation of history on the basis of collaboration by a board of historians. It sought to extend the historical perspective by taking into account the role and contribution of mystics, poets and others. It was under this tradition of history writing that for the first time in Asian history statistical data became a part of historical study. Finally, due to the influx of scholars from Iran and Central Asia an opportunity was created for the intermingling of different historical traditions. The richness and variety of the historical literature lent a peculiar charm to the history of the period and provided new perspectives for its study.

The ‘Age of Akbar’ was an age of political stability, cultural efflorescence and intellectual ferment. These trends found expression in the historical literature of the period. No period in Indian history can match with the reign of Akbar so far as the production of historical literature is concerned. Each historian of the period needs to be understood and interpreted in the background of his own milieu and in the light of his own motivations, predilections and ideals.<sup>3</sup>

The focus of this paper would be to analyze two works of one of the most important historians of Akbar's time- Mulla Abdul Qadir Badauni. The works being taken up for analysis are his most famous work- the *Muntakhab-ut-Tawarikh* and his lesser-known work- the *Najat-ur-Rashid*. It is important to discern the importance of these rich historical treatises written by Badauni. The political and social milieu of the time which might have had a considerable amount of

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<sup>1</sup>Harbans Mukhia, *Historiography During the Reign of Akbar*, Vikas Publishing House Pvt. Ltd, 1976

<sup>2</sup>Khaliq Ahmad Nizami, *On History and Historians of Medieval India*, Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers Pvt. Ltd, 1983

<sup>3</sup>Khaliq Ahmad Nizami, *On History and Historians of Medieval India*, Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers Pvt. Ltd, 1983

impact on the way Badauni wrote history will also be discussed. The way historians have analysed the two texts will also be scrutinized.

### **The ideological orientation of Badauni and the influence it had on his writing**

In any discussion on the ideological orientation of Badauni, it becomes extremely important to discuss his educational background and to find out whether the kind of education that he received made him a “fanatic”. He received his education at the hands of people like Miyan Hatim of Sambhal who were men of goodwill and free from any fanatic influences. He also studied under Sheikh Mubarak of Nagor, the father of Faizi and Abul Fazl and a supporter of the *Mahdavis*. Thus, there was nothing inherent in his education which made him adopt a conservative approach. Moreover, he was learned enough in theology and jurisprudence to be able to meet the ulema on their own ground and emerge victorious. In fact, he found favour with Akbar because of his literary ability and his success in arguments against the ulema of the court.<sup>4</sup> It was indeed recognition of his accomplishments and versatility that the Emperor associated him with the project of translation of Indian classics into Persian and he played the most significant role in the activities of the *Maktab Khana* (translation bureau set up by Akbar).<sup>5</sup> His hostility to every prevalent opinion may have enhanced his value for Akbar. An important ideological conflict in Badauni’s thinking is apparent from the fact that he helped Akbar undermine the orthodox Sunni opinion in the court- the opinion to which his own thinking could broadly be assigned.<sup>6</sup>

The orthodox ideology of Badauni dictated that he should ridicule all those people who stood in the way of Islam. He, therefore, portrayed himself as a ‘Champion of the Faith.’ He criticized Akbar on the grounds that he had contracted certain rigid notions in his mind and was not willing to listen to anything except what was derogatory to Islam. It is unfortunate that to Badauni’s mind ordinary human courtesy and loyalty to the Faith were mutually exclusive phenomena in which he naively preferred one to the other.

Some scholars are also of the opinion that his criticism for Akbar stems from his personal jealousy towards his rival Abul Fazl. In fact, many argue that Badauni criticized Akbar’s policy just for the sake of criticism and to pose a challenge to Abul Fazl and the praises the latter bestowed on the Emperor. This might be true considering the fact that Badauni criticized all those policies of the Emperor which Abul Fazl so proudly extolled.

### **The Muntakhab-ut-Tawarikh**

The *Muntakhab-ut-Tawarikh* literally means ‘history written with a vengeance.’ It is the only work which was written during the time of Akbar but not for Akbar. The book is divided into three volumes and each volume has a distinct narrative style and subject of discussion. His disgust with the “heresies” and “innovations” of Akbar’s reign, against which he could openly register only limited protest, compelled him to resort to the writing of these volumes secretly. He has explained his objective in writing the text by declaring that- “I have no other objective in writing this book except to express my grief for the faith and heart-burning for the deceased community of Muslims, which became a non-entity and is still so. And to God I look for refuge from reproach, hatred, jealousy, and persecution.”<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>Mohibul Hasan, *Historians of Medieval India*, Meenakshi Prakashan, 1968

<sup>5</sup>Ishtiyaq Ahmad Zilli, ‘Badauni Revisited: An analytical study of Najat-ur-Rashid.’ In Iqtidar Husain Siddiqui (ed.) *Medieval India: Essays in Intellectual Thought and Culture*, Vol. I, Manohar Publishers, 2003

<sup>6</sup>Harbans Mukhia, *Historiography During the Reign of Akbar*, Vikas Publishing House Pvt. Ltd, 1976

<sup>7</sup>Harbans Mukhia, *Historiography During the Reign of Akbar*, Vikas Publishing House Pvt. Ltd, 1976

In the book, Badauni has criticized Akbar on ideological grounds, but he was his ardent supporter in political matters. So long as religion and politics move separately, Badauni had all respect and admiration for Akbar, but the moment the Emperor crossed the Rubicon and started interfering in religious matters, Badauni took up his cudgels against him. He represented the voice of orthodoxy against Akbar's religious experiments and innovations. But in spite of his exclusive and fanatical thinking, the *Muntakhab-ut-Tawarikh* had a charm of its own.

The second volume of the text is the most important of the three volumes, and it is also the most discussed and debated section of the chronicler's work. It discusses the events of the first forty years of Akbar's reign, set in the form of an annual chronicle. The events have been generally narrated under the head of the year of their occurrence. Within the framework of the annual chronicle, the order of precedence of events has been maintained. An interesting feature of the book is the intertwining of biographical notes with the narrative of events. In fact, in a number of cases, Badauni interrupts the narration of events to give personal notes on the men involved in it. Thus, while mentioning the capture of Nagarkot, he gives a short account of Birbal's life who was given charge of the fort. Moreover, his account of Abul Fazl's life, when he joined the imperial court, is a classic in literary abuse. The events described in the text had necessarily to be selective. Therefore, he recorded only "events of general importance" and omitted the "minor ones."

According to Harbans Mukhia, unlike the *Akbarnama* and the *Tabaqat-i-Akbari*, the *Muntakhab-ut-Tawarikh* does not proceed as a straight, continuous narration. History, for Badauni, had many bylanes and fortunately he strayed into them quite frequently. The formal tenor of the text being that of political history, information on accessions, rebellions of nobles, wars, conquests, battle arrays, etc are abounding. Badauni also gives considerable information on the administrative organization of Akbar's empire. He deals in some details, for example, with the introduction, working and subsequent failure of the *Karori* system. Similarly, the branding of horses has been given in sufficient detail in the text. The author also gives his own version of how this system affected the concerned interests; that the widespread rebellions in Bengal and Bihar were linked with this measure is established by Badauni.

Badauni's *Muntakhab* is the chief contemporary source of information on the discussions in Akbar's *Ibadat Khana*.<sup>8</sup> He was himself a participant in the discussions and therefore he narrates a firsthand account. This, however, is not sufficient testimony to the authenticity of the details. From Badauni we know that ordeal by fire was put forward as a means of establishing the truth or otherwise of a religion. It is in the *Muntakhab*, that the universality of the *Wahdat-ul-Wujud* is questioned. He clearly mentions that the Sufic doctrine was not accepted universally. It is of importance to note that Badauni was not an ardent supporter of the Sufic tradition himself, mainly because this tradition celebrated inclusiveness, and Badauni's orthodoxy was extremely exclusive in nature.

It is Badauni alone who discussed the circumstances that led to the phenomena of the *Mahzarnama*. Abul Fazl furnishes only a cursory account and gives only a summary of the document, while Nizam-ud-din Ahmed's narration of the proceedings is inadequate and very often incorrect. It is significant to note that Badauni's orthodoxy is not directed only against the religious reforms of Akbar, but is all pervading. He opposed not only the social reforms promulgated by the Emperor, but also criticized his most important administrative measures, for example, the branding of the horses and the *Mansabdari* system.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup>Mulla Abdul Qadir Badauni, *Muntakhab-ut-Tawarikh*, translated by W.H. Lowe, Idarah-i-Adabiyat-i-Dilli, reprint 1978

<sup>9</sup>Harbans Mukhia, *Historiography During the Reign of Akbar*, Vikas Publishing House Pvt. Ltd, 1976

Harbans Mukhia emphasizes that Badauni's hostility to Akbar's reign as discussed in the *Muntakhab-ut-Tawarikh*, is emotional and personal and he makes no attempt to rationalize it. His professed orthodoxy is not exactly a new factor in medieval Indian history writing. Barani is his most distinguished predecessor. But whereas Barani insists on offering an alternative political theory and institutions to the state of his day, Badauni concentrates merely on demolishing all that had emerged after a long historical process without suggesting any positive choice. The reason is that whereas Barani studies history as a changing process capable of yielding certain general lessons, and whereas in the light of historical experiences he was prepared to rationalize even Islam, for Badauni history was equivalent to stories and biographies and at best a source of examples to the virtuous men, and a study of history as a rational science would destroy his assumption of loyalty to the Faith.

Muhammad Mujeeb in his assessment of Badauni has emphasized that "he had no taste for investigation and research and no desire to enrich the existing historical knowledge." According to Mujeeb, Badauni's *Muntakhab* is obviously and intensely subjective. It belongs to the category of memoirs and not history. However, Mujeeb praises Badauni because he feels that the author wore no disguise and wrote as he felt.

Harbans Mukhia emphasizes that Badauni's conception of Islam is very naïve and personal. Elaborating on his most basic assumption that Islam was being undermined by the state in his age, in terms of his own personal experience, he writes a very impressionistic account, according to Mukhia. He based his information mostly on the evidence of his eyes and ears. Events and developments of no personal concern to him tend to recede into the background in the *Muntakhab*. According to Mukhia, Badauni does not treat history as an organic whole; instead he equates it with stories and biographies. Mukhia explains that the *Muntakhab* should be treated as the only way by which Badauni could register his protest. In the words of S.A.A. Rizvi, "one could almost believe he wrote to glorify the pettiness of vision and stinginess of soul of the most hard-bound of the traditional ulema."<sup>10</sup>

Khaliq Ahmad Nizami in his study on the historical literature of Akbar's period has analysed the value of the *Muntakhab-ut-Tawarikh*. He points out that even though his contemporary chronicles and modern historians have disagreed with Badauni's point of view, it must not be forgotten that the *Muntakhab-ut-Tawarikh* is a book of immense historical value in analysing the factors which defeated Akbar's attempt at a religious synthesis.<sup>11</sup> According to Nizami, Badauni's work fills in the gap left by Abul Fazl. In cases where the latter's text does not prove proper information on certain events, the former's work gives details of it. In fact, his work is a supplement and adjunct to Abul Fazl's work.

The *Akbarnama* never spells out the orthodox measures of Akbar, which are fully elaborated in Badauni's *Muntakhab-ut-Tawarikh*. For example, the policy of *sulh-e-kul* is discussed by Abul Fazl, whereas the *Mahzarnama* is completely ignored. The *Mahzar*, however, finds special mention in the *Muntakhab-ut-Tawarikh*. Similarly, the re-imposition of the *jaziya* is completely ignored by Abul Fazl, but discussed by Badauni.

What has, however, decimated the value of his work is a feeling of jealousy and vendetta that runs throughout against those who had gone higher in the estimation of the Emperor, and these included his own colleagues or school fellows. Badauni always viewed himself in relation to the steep rise of Abul Fazl in Akbar's favour, and his consequent material advance. But apart from

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<sup>10</sup>S.A.A. Rizvi, *The Religious and Intellectual History of the Muslims During the Reign of Akbar*

<sup>11</sup>Khaliq Ahmad Nizami, *On History and Historians of Medieval India*, Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers Pvt. Ltd, 1983

these personal handicaps and shortcomings, Badauni has a place of his own in the historiography of medieval India. He took the most significant step in extending the scope and conspectus of history by including in his history accounts of literary, religious and social activities of the people belonging to different walks of life. Notwithstanding his fanatical views, the *Muntakhab-ut-Tawarikh*, according to Nizami, is invaluable for a study of the religious and intellectual history of medieval India.

### **The Najat-ur-Rashid**

The *Najat-ur-Rashid* is an important text for reconstructing the ideas of Badauni. The author's reputation as a scholar and historian rested on his *Muntakhab-ut-Tawarikh*. Its portraiture of Akbar and his policies, particularly his religious views, has provoked hostile comments and criticism. However, for an objective assessment of Badauni's personality, basic patterns of his thought and his contributions, it is necessary that his views be not confined to the *Muntakhab-ut-Tawarikh* alone. His other work also needs to be taken into consideration- the *Najat-ur-Rashid*. Unfortunately, this book has not received adequate attention from historians and scholars. An analysis of this book could perhaps give a more balanced picture of one of the most controversial writers of medieval India. Moreover, it will also help in understanding many of the postulates of Badauni given in the *Muntakhab*, for it not only supplements the information therein but also provides a theoretical background for understanding Badauni's stand on Akbar's religious policies.

Two reasons can be ascribed to this book not getting enough attention by historians: firstly, the *Najat-ur-Rashid* like the *Muntakhab-ut-Tawarikh* might have been kept a secret and secondly, it might have had a selective and restricted circulation. Scarcity of manuscripts is a clear indicator of this possibility. Modern scholars too have not given adequate attention to this important work. Peter Hardy describes it as a "work on Sufism, ethics and the *Mahdavi* movement of Badauni's days." S.A.A. Rizvi has defined it as a "theological mystical work." However, in another reference to the book, Rizvi elaborates that "the *Muntakhab-ut-Tawarikh* is meant to destroy the faith of the Sunnis in Akbar; the *Najat-ur-Rashid* seeks to reiterate the principles on which orthodox Sunnism can be revived, thus both the works complement and supplement each other." Ishtiaq Ahmad Zilli, however, has rebuffed this view postulated by Rizvi in his analytical work on Badauni's text. Blochmann has described it as a "polemical work." This view has also faced criticism from Zilli who doesn't consider it to be a polemical work in any sense. Ivanov says that "it is a Sufic ethical treatise, richly interspersed with interesting historical anecdotes and controversial discussion." The assessment of the work as a Sufic treatise has also been condemned by Zilli. According to Zilli in his article on *Najat-ur-Rashid*, "it is extremely important to analyse the work keeping in mind not only the objectives of the author, but also the contents of the books and not allow oneself to judge it with predetermined notions."

The dates of compilation of the two texts written by Badauni have also come under scrutiny by historians. Rizvi thinks that the two texts were written simultaneously. Zilli is, however, of the view that though the content of the two complement each other, the texts were not written simultaneously. The aims of both the books converged at one level and that was bound to create similarity between them. The *Najat-ur-Rashid* was compiled in 1591, whereas the last date mentioned in the *Muntakhab-ut-Tawarikh* in 1595. The former contains a reference to the latter, which might suggest that the latter was complete by the time the former was being compiled or at least it was being compiled simultaneously.

Badauni states in the very beginning that the purpose of writing the *Najat-ur-Rashid* was to elaborate upon the 'vices of the soul' and sins, both mortal and venal. The text helps us in understanding the acceptable and non-acceptable forms of behaviour. It is clear, therefore, that the book neither deals with Sufism nor ethics. From a brief survey of the contents of the text, it is clear

that the book is basically a theological treatise which deals with sins, crimes, offences, and misdemeanours that Islam forbids. The various issues covered in the book have been discussed in the light of the Quran, *Hadith* and Islamic jurisprudence. For the purpose of elaboration, stories and anecdotes from history and Sufi literature are employed. However, occasional references to Sufism do not mean that the text is a Sufi doctrine.

Badauni in this text has made a general assessment of the social ills prevalent in the society. The society, it should be noted here was a society under the political aegis of Akbar whom Badauni condemned for defaming the Faith. Thus, by criticizing the social structure and a society engulfed with sinful people, he indirectly condemns Akbar. Nevertheless, there is little doubt that the book is a scathing indictment of Akbar's religious policies, albeit in an entirely indirect manner.

The most detailed discussion in the *Najat-ur-Rashidis* on heresy. Different kinds of heresies that appeared at various points in the history of Islam have been discussed. This is one of the exceptional sections of the book, where while reading it, one has an uncanny feeling that it is a reflection on contemporary conditions and some of the trends of thought in vogue at the imperial court. It is obvious that the book seeks to reform and reverse the indifference to Islamic prescriptions that are increasingly affecting various sections of society as a direct consequence of Akbar's religious policies. But this is not stated anywhere in the text. The book, however, mentions that the elite at the court with their vast influence, prestige and power of patronage, had unleashed a sustained campaign to impress upon the people that the traditional religion was no more relevant. Therefore, for those with faith in the religion it was the need of the hour to do something to resist this trend.

The *Najat-ur-Rashid* is remarkable in the sense that while it is an open indictment of Akbar's *sulh-i-kul* and *Din-i-Ilahi*, it does not refer to these concepts or even mention Akbar by name. The names of the scholars and dignitaries of the court and the leading lights of the new dispensation are also conspicuous by their absence. According to Peter Hardy and Harbans Mukhia, Badauni's intolerant attitude towards the Hindus made him criticize Akbar's religious policies, which he viewed as being pro-Hindu. However, in the *Najat-ur-Rashid*, Badauni has opined differently on issues connected with the Hindus. He has equated them with the *mushriks* (polytheists) of the Prophet's time and has advocated that the same laws should be applied to them.

In the *Najat-ur-Rashid*, Badauni has also condemned cow-slaughter on the grounds that it would hurt the sentiments and sensibilities of the non-Muslims. He also displays remarkable tolerance towards the heterodox sects of Islam, for example, the *Mahdavis* and the unorthodox Sufis. He also describes Shaikh Mubarak with great respect and reverence. Unlike in his *Muntakhab*, Badauni in the *Najat-ur-Rashid* holds disrespect against the king as an unacceptable and vicious crime.

The *Najat-ur-Rashid* is a strong censure of Akbar's policies though he has not been mentioned anywhere by name. However, the few indirect references to him are invariably respectful. He is referred to as *Khalifa-i-zaman* and *Sahib-i-zaman*. Moreover, Badauni has included topics like 'rebellion against the king' and 'cursing the king' in the category of heinous sins. He has argued that kings are necessary for the peace and tranquillity of the society. Thus, a reading of the *Najat-ur-Rashid* helps Badauni as an impartial historian. There is a possibility that a shift in Badauni's views on the state developed over a period of time, and that most of his orthodox ideas came into being after the composition of the *Najat-ur-Rashid*. It is evident from this text that Badauni was not such an orthodox theologian as he is made out to be, and as is evident from the *Muntakhab-ut-Tawarikh*. A gradual shift in his attitude might have been a result of his personal ambitions; it might have also been a result of the changing times in the imperial court.

## Conclusion

Thus to conclude it may be reiterated that a critical assessment of Badauni is incomplete without a reading of both the historical sources that he is credited to have written. An analysis based only on the reading of one text does not provide an objective assessment of his ideas.