

## Notes

# Poetry as history: three poetic sources for the reign of Muhammad b. Tughluq

Syed Munir Wasti\*

Among the poetic works that furnish a vast and valuable account of history for the period of medieval Muslim rule in India are the *Qasāid Badr Chach*. Badr was a native of Chach [mod. Tashkent] and, seeking his fortune, came to the subcontinent. He then attached himself to the court of Muhammad b. Tughluq to earn royal patronage and became a poet-laureate of this volatile-natured Emperor. Badr is supposed to have died in 1344 CE.<sup>1</sup> In his authoritative study of Muhammad b. Tughluq, Dr. A. Mahdi Husain gives the value of the *Qasāid* thus:

[They] supply us by means of chronograms with invaluable information, and enable us to fix the dates of events.<sup>2</sup>

The value of the *Qasāid* as a contemporary source for an important period of medieval Muslim India is thus well-established. The poet prides himself on being awarded the title of '*Fakhruz-zamān*' [= 'pride of the age'] by the Sultan himself.

In the manner of traditional Persian *qasīdas*, Badr Chach begins with a lengthy divine laudation followed by praise for the Holy Prophet [PBUH] and then an assertion of his own poetic skills. Only after this periphrastic introduction does the poet mention the Sultan Muhammad b. Tughluq in the florid and hyperbolic style of professional panegyrists [*wassāf*]. The various qualities and distinctions that the Sultan enjoys are brought out in a leisurely and superlative display. Especially notable among these are the caliphal investitures granted by the phantom caliph of the Abbasids who survived the Mongol hordes in 1258, eeking out a

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\* Dr. Syed Munir Wasti, former Chairman, Department of English, University of Karachi.

<sup>1</sup> Badr Chach, *Qasāid*, Kanpur, 1907. Personal information given in *Qāmūs al-mashāhīr*, by Nizami Badayuni, reprinted Karachi, 1995, p.125.

<sup>2</sup> Agha Mahdi Husain, *The Rise and Fall of Muhammad bin Tughluq*, London, 1938, p.251.

wretched existence in Cairo. The various conquests and capture of forts [such as the supposedly invincible fort of Nagarkot] are described with a flourish. Various celebrations to mark the accession of the Sultan are given in accurate detail. But all these panoramic pictures are not given in an orderly or chronological manner. They are interspersed with poems professing the poet's fidelity to, and admiration of, the person of the Sultan. In spite of his poetic prowess, Badr Chach only once rhymes 'Tughluq' with 'bar Haq' in the verse:

*Khudaygān-i-salātīn Muhammad-i-Tughluq*  
*Abul mujāhid-i-a'zam shahanshah-i bar Haq.*

Translation:

The ruler of kings, Muhammad Tughluq  
The great warrior, the king of kings, in sooth.

On the whole, the *Qasāid Badr Chach* give an official version of the situation on the ground and thus is an uncritical conspectus of the Sultan's reign and achievements.<sup>3</sup> As a record of social history, it is extremely valuable – more so than a record of bare facts and dates.

As compared to the powerful praises sung by Badr Chach, we find a severe, even harsh, and sometimes abusive torrent of attacks on Muhammad b. Tughluq, his personal defects and the failure of his politics in the versified history of 'Isami entitled *Futūh al-Salātīn*.<sup>4</sup> 'Isami composed this long narrative poem on the lines of the *Shāhnāma* of Firdausi. The poem begins with the time of Sultan Mahmud of Ghazna and continues till the time of Muhammad b. Tughluq. 'Isami did not enjoy any royal patronage but was attached to the court of a rebel governor, 'Alauddin Hasan.<sup>5</sup> A comparison between the two versified accounts can strike a balance between the two extremes that are represented in the two divergent accounts. 'Isami's work consists of 12,000 lines. Unlike Badr Chach, 'Isami's verse is simple and not disfigured by poetic word-play and exaggeration. According to the foreword to the edition by A. S. Usha [Madras, 1948] by S.M. Husayn Nainar, "The language is extraordinarily simple and direct, devoid of rhetorical artifices and verbal conceits".<sup>6</sup> The account of Muhammad b. Tughluq starts with his '*julūs*' [enthronement] and continues till 1249 – just two years before his death.

<sup>3</sup> In the essay *Shu-'arā* by S. Z. Ahmed in *Tārīkh Adabiyāt musalmānān-i-Pakistān wa Hind*, vol. 3 [*Fārsi adab*], Lahore, 1971, pp.232-35.

<sup>4</sup> Ed. A. S. Usha, *The Futūh al-Salātīn of 'Isami*, Madras, 1948.

<sup>5</sup> Mahdi Husain, *op.cit.*, p.253.

<sup>6</sup> Usha, *op.cit.*, p.vi.

The account initially describes the ‘fareyb’ [fraud] played by the Sultan upon the people of India. This refers to his supposedly hypocritical grief on the death of his father, Ghiyathuddin Tughluq. The sultan’s various fantastic and wild schemes [for the conquest of Central Asia, the token currency and the shifting of capital to Daulatabad etc.] are described with all their cruelty and waste. The persecution of those who did not leave Delhi for Daulatabad is shown graphically through the suffering of the poet’s aged grandfather. Towards the end, an interesting comparison is made between ‘Alauddin Khilji and Muhammad b. Tughluq – both ambitious, inflexible and self-centred, intolerant of criticism. ‘Isami mentions two opposing traits of Muhammad b. Tughluq viz. cruelty and generosity. ‘Alauddin Khilji is praised for his Islamic endeavours while Muhammad b. Tughluq is shown as being anti-Islamic:

*Gar ū kard Islām rā āshkār*

*Azīn kufr ba-garift yaksar dayār*

Translation:

If he [‘Alauddin] openly professed Islam

He [Tughluq] made all areas apostates.

The two opposing pictures assist the historian of later times to reconstruct the possible reality behind the panegyric of one and the censure of the other.

The *Futūh al-Salātin*, according to Peter Hardy ‘treats the past as a succession of exciting episodes in which Muslim heroes, chiefly Sultans of Delhi, demonstrate their qualities’.<sup>7</sup> As regards Muhammad b. Tughluq, Hardy writes that ‘he [Tughluq] was ‘Isami’s great villain ... In sum, ‘Isami condemns Muhammad b. Tughluq as a parricide, an oppressor, a hypocrite, an infidel and contemner of true religion and a corrupter of his subjects’ morals’.<sup>8</sup>

In his study, *On history and historians of medieval India*, Professor Khaliq Ahmed Nizami calls ‘Isami ‘an inveterate enemy of Muhammad Tughluq’<sup>9</sup> and a ‘hostile contemporary’ but his *Futūh al-Salātin* is valuable for its historical details not mentioned by other historians writing in prose.

<sup>7</sup> Peter Hardy in *Historians of India, Pakistan and Ceylon* [ed. C.H. Philips], London, 1967, pp.124-25.

<sup>8</sup> Peter Hardy, *Historians of Medieval India*, London, 1960, pp.108-09.

<sup>9</sup> Khaliq Ahmed Nizami, *On history and historians of medieval India*, Delhi, 2000, p.114.

The *Tughluq Nāma*<sup>10</sup> of Amir Khusrau is the last of his historical *mathnavīs* and covers the revolt of Ghazi Malik Tughluq [the father of Muhammad b. Tughluq] against the apostate Khusrau Khan. It refers to Muhammad b. Tughluq as an intelligent warrior capable of organization and resistance who strengthened his father's forces in his struggle against Khusrau Khan. Prof. S.H. Askari has given a detailed account of this poem and states, "The *Tughluq Nāma* ... is not devoid of things of social and cultural import".<sup>11</sup> The poem once considered lost, was rediscovered and edited in the 1930s.<sup>12</sup> In fact, the poem's extant MS ends with the capture of Khusrau Khan by Ulugh Khan [Muhammad b. Tughluq]. The last sub-heading [in prose] runs thus:

*Gariḡtāri-i Khusrau az Ulugh Khan mukhālīf kush  
chu murgh-i shoom kush bāzi kunad Sayd az barāi  
khur*

Translation:

The capture of Khusrau by Ulugh Khan his  
opponent in the manner that an evil hawk plays with  
a bird before devouring it.

The intimate details given by Amir Khusrau are not given by others. For example, he mentions that when the rival armies of Khusrau Khan [originally a Hindu] and Ghazi Malik Tughluq clashed, the Hindu army had attached the teeth of hogs to their flags so as to offend the Muslims.<sup>13</sup>

Syed Hashmi Faridabadi, the first editor of the printed text, has given an account of the discovery of the lost text [in two essays in *Islamic Culture*, Jan.–March & April–June 1934]. Dr. Mahdi Husain writes that the *Tughluq Nāma* 'supplements the information contained in Barani's work'.<sup>14</sup> According to Rashid Ahmad, the original finder of the poem, the *Tughluq Nāma* is the most important of Khusrau's poems as it lays more emphasis on historical details rather than on verbal felicities and shows the maturation of the poet's historical consciousness.<sup>15</sup>

Dr. Wahid Mirza sums it up thus:

<sup>10</sup> Ed. S. H. Faridabadi, *The 'Tughluq Nama' of Amir Khusrau*, Aurangabad, 1933.

<sup>11</sup> S. H. Askari, *Amir Khusrau as a historian*, Patna, 1992, p.12.

<sup>12</sup> M. Wahid Mirza, *The life and works of Amir Khusrau*, Islamabad, 1975.

<sup>13</sup> In the essay, *Tārīkh* by Khwaja A. H. Yazdani, in *Tārīkh adabiyāt musalmānān-i-Pakistan wa Hind*, *op.cit.*

<sup>14</sup> Mahdi Husain, *op.cit.*, p.147.

<sup>15</sup> In his preface given in Faridabadi, *op.cit.*

The historical importance of the poem cannot be denied. Khusrau tells the story with characteristic frankness and rare accuracy.<sup>16</sup>

Dr. K.A. Nizami states the value of the *Tughluq Nāma* thus:

In the *Tughluq Nāma*, Amir Khusrau has given the full account of the destruction of the Khiljis and the enthronement of the Tughluqs. These details are not to be found elsewhere save in the *Tughluq Nāma*. This is the last work of Amir Khusrau and ends his series of historical *mathnavīs*.<sup>17</sup>

A fourth poetical source could be the *Dīvān*<sup>18</sup> of Amir Hasan Sijzi. Sijzi, an important disciple of Nizamuddin Auliya and compiler of his *malfuzāt*, the *Fawā'id al-fu'ād*.<sup>19</sup> However, as Sijzi has not mentioned the Sultan in the *Fawā'id al-fu'ād*, the *Dīvān* also reflects this ambivalent attitude though references to him are present. Sijzi was a co-disciple with Amir Khusrau of Nizamuddin Auliya. Amir Khusrau was quick to acknowledge the poetic prowess of Amir Hasan:

*Khusrau shi 'r-i-tu asrār-i-hadis ast magar*

*Az sukhan-hāi tu am bū-i-Hasan mī āyad*

Translation:

Khusrau! Your verses are the secrets [of love]

But from your words the fragrance of Hasan comes!<sup>20</sup>

It is clear in conclusion that the poets studied here were primarily writing poetry, not history. They did not consider themselves as chroniclers but felt they were creative artists. Hence poetry and its subtleties had priority over the recording of factual evidence whatever their personal bias may have been. This is obvious from the fact that they preferred poetry over prose in their compositions. They were more inclined towards exhibiting their poetic control over the nuances of the Persian language. In the case of Amir Khusrau, he was equally capable in prose and poetry but poetry somehow came naturally to him despite its

<sup>16</sup> Mirza, *op.cit.*, p.253.

<sup>17</sup> K. A. Nizami, *Amīr Khusrau mu'warrikh kī haysiyyat se in Afkār: Khusrau edition*, Karachi, Nov.-Dec. 1975, p.86.

<sup>18</sup> Hasan Sijzi Dehlavi, *Dīvān*, ed. Muhammad Ali Mahvi, Hyderabad Deccan, 1352 AH.

<sup>19</sup> Translated by Bruce B. Lawrence as *Morals for the Heart*, New York, 1992.

<sup>20</sup> Quoted by S. Z. Ahmad, *op.cit.* [see No. 3]. This is also the opinion of Sabahuddin Abdul-Rehman in *Amir Khusrau as a genius*, Delhi, 1982, p.53.

strictures of prosody. In the case of 'Isami, he exhibits the tendency to both 'please and instruct', composing his narrative as a textbooks of morals. Badr Chach was an official poet unabashedly but he did not attract that attention that he felt he deserved. On the whole, the work of the three poets as history is subject to their personal poetic preferences; but as supplements to the prose histories of the same time, they are all extremely valuable.