

Persia and Central Asia in the Indian Tapestry
Political and Cultural Relations
With reference to Khaterat e Mutribi Samarqandi and
Safarname Mahmud Aamir Wali

"Mutribi has compared his conversation with Jahangir to the one taking place between Hafiz and Timur".....Richard Foltz

The relationship of learned Mughal rulers with Persia and Central Asia had been remarkably important since the very beginning in the course of establishment of Muslim rules in the Indian sub-continent.

The name Mughal is derived from the original homelands of the Timurids, the Central Asian (Turkestan) steppes once conquered by Genghis Khan and hence known as Moghulistan, "Land of Mongols". Although early Mughals spoke the Chagatai language and maintained some Turko-Mongol practices, they became essentially Persianised and transferred the Persian literary and high culture to South Asia, thus forming the base for the 'Indo-Persian Culture' and the Spread of Islam in South Asia.¹

The founder of Mughal dynasty in India, Babur brought with him to Hindustan some of the heritage of Central Asian politics and an ever-recurring dream of the re-conquest of

Transoxiana from the Uzbeks. Shaybani Khan had driven him away from Samarqand in 1500. Series of military defeats Babur suffered at the hands of the Uzbeks was added the personal humiliation, that as per some references to Tuzk-e-Babri/Baburnama / Babur's Memoirs 'three of Babur's sisters had been carried away by the Uzbeks or given to them as ransom.' In this historical book after some background, Babur describes his fluctuating fortunes as a minor ruler in Central Asia - in which he took and lost Samarkand twice - and his move to Kabul in 1504. The kingdom Babur had carved out for himself in Kabul but seemed insecure in view of the growing power of Shaybani Khan who occupied Herat in 1507 and though Babur occupied Qandhar in the same year. Babur had to abandon it as Shaybani Khan proceeded to besiege it. Rather than to face the Uzbeks, Babur eventually decided to turn to India.³

Shabani Khan's disastrous end in 1510 at the hand of Shah Ismail made Babur feel relaxed from Uzbek threat and decided to recover lost dominions in Transoxiana (ماوراءالنهر), (Transoxiana, known in Arabic and Persian sources as Mawaraunnahr is the ancient name used for the portion of Central Asia corresponding approximately with modern-day Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, southern Kyrgyzstan and southwest Kazakhstan. Geographically, it is the region between the Amu Darya and Syr Darya rivers. The area had been known to the Greeks as Transoxania (Land beyond the Oxus), to the Arabs as

Mawaraunnahr (Land Beyond the River), and to the Iranians as Turan, a term used in the Persian national epic Shahnameh).⁴

Babur did not miss sending an embassy to Shah Ismail the Safavid monarch to congratulate him on his victory over the mighty Uzbek Shabani Khan. Babur asked the Safavid monarch to help him to recover Transoxiana. With the help of Persian auxiliaries Babur re-occupied Samarqand for the third time in 1511 but had to abandon it in 1512 before a vigorous onslaught of the Uzbeks. A second and much stronger Persian force under Najm-i-thani achieved some initial successes against the Uzbeks even though most of the Persian amirs were disloyal to him, but the massacre of Sunnis, against Babur's advice, invoked the retaliatory fury of the Uzbeks who rallied around Ubaidullah Khan and Jani Beg and inflicted several defeats on Babur and his Persian allies. Babur lost popular support in Central Asia due to his dependence on Shi'ite Persia and finally returned to Kabul, reconciling himself to the loss of his ancestral land.⁵

From early sixteenth century to the end of eighteenth, almost the entire territory of Dar-al-Islam⁶ was absorbed by the three great empires, the Ottoman, the Safavid and the Mughal. This gives the history of Islam during these centuries a recognisable political and cultural pattern.⁷ These empires shared a common Turco-Mongol heritage, noticeable in their systems of administration, but they were preoccupied essentially with their individual problems. The Ottomans primarily with Europe, the

Safavids with the consolidation of Shi'ism in Persia and the Mughals with the process of the whole of the Indian sub-continent in their empire and the evolution of a modus vivendi⁸ with the Hindus. There was therefore no integral unity of historical behaviour which one may seek in these three Empires but of course a process of interaction existed all through the way.

Shah Ismail's support to Babur was in the centuries old traditions of strong powers in Persia trying to extend their protectorate over the turbulent marches of Transoxiana through local protégés. Babur had to strike coins in the name of Shah Ismail and order the reading of Friday khutba in his name.⁹

The rivalry between Safavid and Uzbeks continued and had been of great interest for Babur. Babur had always been inclined to Safavid and never faded the idea of re-conquering Transoxiana. So, Babur's 'external political leaning' had two constituents first, the Persia ruled by Safavid and second, Transoxiana ruled by Uzbeks. The former were friendly and thus a mature friendly relationship were offered and followed and the later were rival, thus a conscious diplomatic move had to be kept ready by Babur. Undoubtedly, over the years both Persia and Central Asia have been important lands for Mughals and they preferred to adopt very mature and respectful policies towards both Persia and Central Asia.

Indo-Persian relations were far more complicated than any other relations of Mughals with other contemporary powers.

Qandhar had been the bone of contention between the Mughals and the Safavids for generation after generation due to its trading importance. Babur was reluctant to have Qandhar due to its importance in many ways. Babur led annual expeditions against that city between 1515 and 1518 and had finally occupied it in 1522 two years before the death of Safavid monarch Shah Ismail. The Persians reconciled themselves to the situation.¹⁰ It is indeed important to study how Babur very consciously did not enter into conflict between Safavid and Uzbek and on the other hand persuaded powerful Safavid rulers not to be tough on his occupying Qandhar. With the growth of his own power in India, Babur laid the foundations of an independent Mughal foreign policy, which followed on the whole a course of non-involvement in the fight between the Safavids and the Uzbeks. In pursuance of this neutralist policy Babur developed diplomatic relations with the Uzbeks in 1528, and to minimise the chances of a direct clash with the Uzbeks he created the buffer principality of Badakhshan under Mirza Sulayman.¹¹

Humayun succeeded Babur in 1530. Setting aside the conflict between his brother Kamran and Persians over the control on Qandhar, Humayun concentrated in the Indian territories beyond Qandhar and unfortunately having defeated by Sher Shah Suri in 1540 fled to take refuge in Safavid Empire in Persia. Shah Tahmasp, the Persian Safavid ruler welcomed the Mughal, and treated him as a royal visitor. Here Humayun visited

important centre and was amazed at the Persian artwork and architecture he saw: much of this was the work of the Timurid Sultan Husayn Bayqarah and his ancestor, princess Gauhar Shad, thus he was able to admire the work of his relatives and ancestors at first hand. This must have impressed Humayun for future contacts. He was introduced to the work of the Persian miniaturists, and Kamaledin Behzad had two of his pupils join Humayun in his court. Humayun was amazed at their work and asked if they would work for him if he was to regain the sovereignty of Hindustan and they agreed. Shah Tahmasp provided financial aid and 12,000 choice cavalry to regain his Empire. Persians nobles and soldiers joined Humayun in reconquest of India. Thousands of Persians continued to migrate every year and were given high civil and military positions in the Mughal Empire.¹²

French traveller Francois Bernier visited in the mid of seventeenth century A.D. states that "only Persian ambassadors were allowed to salute the Mughal emperor 'according to the custom of their own country' or to deliver their letters to him 'without the intervention of an Omrah ' (an amir or noble)".¹³

Persians were the second largest nobility of the Mughal Empire in the Indian sub-continent.¹⁴ Throughout the history of the Delhi Sultanate and its successor the Mughal Empire, Persian soldiers, traders, scientists, architects, teachers, poets, artists, theologians and Sufis migrated and settled in Indian

sub-continent. The large influx of Persians of different ranks and backgrounds into the Mughal service changed the nucleus of the Mughal nobility. A fight between Turkic Turani nobility and Persian nobility continued. The Turkic Turani nobility tended to fade away from the political scene and the Persian nobles improved their position. During 1545-1555 A.D. a number of Persians who came in Humayun's service were appointed to important central offices, such as diwan, wazir, and mir-saman (In charge of Imperial Palace).¹⁵

In Mughal India the tradition of Turkish poetry going back to Ali Sher Nawa'i, and imported to India by Babur was still alive in the verses of Bayram Khan and Humayun himself no mean poet in Persian,¹⁶ was deeply sensitive to the beauty of the Turkish admiral ghazals whom he compared with Nawa'i.¹⁷

Mughal, in fact an adaptation of Mughal is from the Persian word for Mongol. Mughals were Muslims and followed Sunni sect of Islam. They were also strongly influenced by the Persians.¹⁸ The Mughals had a multi-racial and multi-religious ruling class in which non-Indians occupied a very major place. The multidimensional role played by the Persians at the Mughal Court and as well in the annals of Mughal India, as a consequence of their continuous migration towards Indian Sub-continent.¹⁹

Commenting on the mansabdars listed in the Ain-i-Akbari, Moreland writes that just under 70 percent of the

nobles whose origin is known were foreigners, mostly Persians, belonging to families which had either come to Hindustan with Emperor Humayun or had arrived at the court after the accession of Emperor Akbar. It underlines the Persians role in the language and literature during the Mughal regime as well as the causes of migration of Persian men-of-pen towards Mughal India.

Causes of the migration of the Persian Emigrants towards Mughal India were many folds. Noted historian, Mansura Haider writes that "the emigrants from Persia also included the Sunnis who feared the Persian Shahs and the retaliatory genocide in that country. Economic motives played a limited role, as peaceful and prosperous conditions prevailed in Persia following the end of the wars with the Ottomans".²⁰ Another factor of prime importance which led to the Persian migration towards India, was the Safavid Empire which was not enough as wealthy as compare to the Mughal Empire in India; therefore, so many Persians emigrated to the Mughal Court. There were also rebels and nobles who lost royal favour and migrated to Mughal Empire. The Mughals also preferred to employ foreign Muslim officials that had little or no local interests and thus were loyal to the Mughal emperor.

Persian Language and Literature during 1556-1605A.D.
Emperor Akbar was fond of acquiring knowledge. Abul Fazl records that "among the books of renown, there are few that are not read in His Majesty's assembly hall; and there are no

historical facts of the past ages or curiosities of service; or interesting points of philosophy with which His Majesty unacquainted." Valuable Persian works like Akhlaq-i-Nasiri, Kimia-i-Saadat, Qabus Nama , the works of Sharaf of Munayr, the Gulistan, the Hadiqa of Hakim Sanai, the Masnavi of Manawi, the Jam-i-Jam, the Bustan, the Shah Nama, the collected Masnavis of Shaikh Nizamul, the works of Khusrau and Maulana Jami, the Diwans of Khaqani, Anwari, and several works on history were continually read out to Akbar. After the conquest of India by the Mughals, further developments in Indo-Persian historiography took place. A number of valuable studies have been produced on medieval Indo-Persian historiography.²¹

Two seventeenth century Central Asian travelers Mutrabi Samarqandi's and Mahud Amir Wali's accounts indeed throw light on important aspects of relationship the Mughal emperor had with Central Asia. It is very important to note that Mutrabi had conversations with Emperor Jahangir at Lahore. Mutrabi has compared his conversation with Jahangir to the one taking place between Hafiz and Timur.

Also shed light on how important Persian Poetry had been in day to day business of the Mughal court and how Mughal nobility actually interacted with the ruler and with one another. Mutrabi has quoted vast number of poetry during his interviewed with Jahangir:

'Help! Time is up for my poor self

The hunter has got me in a noose

For the sigh of what poor self

Have I unjustly destroyed a hundred homes?'

In gratitude for king's good fortune Mutribi recited this couplet:

"O God, as long as the Sun and Moon shall be

May Jahangir son of Akbar remain King."

So mixing India and Central Asia together, also interesting discussions of the nostalgia of the Mughal ruling elite felt for their homeland in Central India....the whole "mental geography" has been presented in the poetical meter here and there. Important literary discussion on Balkh campaign under Humayun and many issues is discussed is historical document and offers a wealth of material on the culture and relations of the Mughal Empire with Central Asia. The nostalgia of cultural roots of Mughals rulers in Central Asia is remarkable. Mutribi, meanwhile, had been enjoying the patronage of the Ashtarkhanid ruler Wali Muhammad, for whom he composed an anthology of poets in 1604.²² It was after the death of his patron in 1612 that Mutribi decided to travel, as many of his countrymen had done, to Mughal India in search of increased fame and fortune. It seems to have occurred to Mutribi about this time to revise his earlier anthology as a gift by which to ingratiate himself with Emperor Jahangir.²³ With this aim in mind he spent two years in Balkh and Badakhshan gathering additional information on Central Asian poets, and after spending a further year revising his work.

he left for Lahore, arriving there in 1626 at the ripe old age of 70.

Richard Foltz writes, one can surmise that Mutribi's motivations in travelling to India at such an advanced age were to a great degree financial. From the intensity with which he prepared his "offering" for Jahangir and the brevity of his stay once received at court it appears he hoped to make a quick killing. In his first audience with the Emperor, Mutribi is told he will be given four things: spending money, clothing, a horse, and a slave boy. When Jahangir asks which his guest would like first, Mutribi unabashedly says he'll take the money.²⁴ In a later session, when Jahangir asks whether he would prefer to be given a Turani (Central Asia) or an Iraqi (Western Iranian) horse, Mutribi says, "Whichever is more expensive?"²⁵

The suspicion that Mutribi's interest in India centered on material gain is further supported by the fact that once he sufficiently attained his desires, Jahangir seems to have been more than generous in heaping gifts upon him. He was impatient to return to Samarqand, fervently begging the emperor's leave after only two months in Lahore, and then stubbornly insisting despite the initial refusal of his royal host, who urged his to come on a trip to Kashmir instead.²⁶

Mutribi may still have felt the burden of family obligations, since he gave these responsibilities as his excuse for leaving India so hastily. However, since Jahangir's offer to send money to Samarqand for Mutribi's family to come and join him in India does

not seem to have influenced him, it might be more accurate to surmise that Mutribi simply did not care for India or have any interest in staying there once his personal mission had been fulfilled. In the end Jahangir released his elderly visitor, after extraction a promise that Mutribi would return to Lahore the following year. But as the Emperor himself died only a few months later, it is unlikely that Mutribi, who was 71 when he returned home to Samarqand in 1037/1626, could or did ever make a second trip to India

Mahmud's ambitions seem to have been both more modest and less materialistic, at least initially. He is generally far more observant and interested in what he sees than is Mutribi. His restless travels across India, which lasted from 1624-31, appear to have been motivated mainly by curiosity and traveler's itch. His account fits in well with a tradition dating back at least to the tenth century, which one can refer to as wonder literature (*adabiyat-l aja'ib*) in which India is portrayed by the Muslim travellers as a "land of the miraculous." Early examples of this type of travel account are included in the *Kitab aja'ib al-hind*, written around 956, attributed (probably falsely) to an Iranian sea-captain by the name of Buzurg b. Shahriar, whose account is one of several in that collection. The first major such work by a Central Asian Muslim is, of course, the *Kitab fi tahqiq ma li'l-hind* of Abu Raihan Muhammad b. Ahmad al-Biruni, written in the early eleventh century. It is clear from the introductory remarks to

his travelogue that the land of India possessed an awesome reputation in the minds of Central Asians. Mahmud writes:

Since the immensity of India is full of seemingly people, garnished with numerous rarities and symbols which witness the perfect force (of God), and landscapes illuminated by refinements and abundant grace, and the traces of Creation and the secrets of invention are to be found there, the bird of my intention took off in flight in that direction.

If the elderly mulla from Samarqand proved a great source of entertainment for the Mughal emperor, this is not to say that Mutribi's appeal for Jahangir was merely that of a buffoon, at least any more than with anyone who came into the royal presence. On the other hand what is certainly clear, even filtering out the self-important bias of Mutribi's narrative, is that Jahangir valued him as an important source of news and information from Central Asia.

Moreover, the tone of the Emperor's frequent questions to Mutribi about Central Asian people and places is distinctly compatriotic: he inquires about the Juybari sheikhs of Bukhara as of mutual acquaintances, and of local affairs in the manner of a longtime expatriate plying a more recent one for the latest gossip from home. Given that no Mughal monarch since Jahangir's grandfather had ever set foot on Central Asian soil, this attitude provides a curious testimony to the dynasty's nostalgic mentality, which persisted unsatisfied for at least three

further generations.

In his first interviews with Jahangir, Mutribi asks anxiously about the anthology he has offered the Emperor. Jahangir, who clearly has not bothered to look at the gift, yet, keeps changing the subject to Samarqand. The first thing he wants to know, what is the state of repair of the Gur-i Amir (Tamerlane's tomb)? Mutribi coyly replies that he detailed this in his book. In a session several weeks later, Jahangir wants to know the annual maintenance of the mausoleum, which Mutribi estimates "informally" at 10,000 rupees. The Emperor then states that, in accordance with his guest's information, he will send that amount to Samarqand, thereby assuming responsibility for the upkeep of this "Mughal family monument."²⁷

References

1. Robert L. Canfield, *Turko-Persia in historical perspective*, Cambridge University Press, 1991. pg 20: "The Mughals - Persianised Turks who invaded from Central Asia and claimed descent from both Timur and Genghis - strengthened the Persianate culture of Muslim India".
2. Heritage refers to something inherited from the past. The word has several different connotation and senses including natural, cultural and political one. Here, cultural and political heritage are more specific.
3. Leyden and Erskine, ii, 41-56, Beveridge, ii, 330-9. (Babur, *Tuzk-e- Babri*)
4. Transoxiana, (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Transoxiana>)
5. Dughlat, 260-1; Khurshah ibn Qubad, (*Mir Muhammad al-Bukhari, Abdullah Nama*).
6. Dar al-Islam (Arabic: دار الاسلام literally house/abode of Islam; or Dar as-Salam, house/abode of Peace; or Dar al-Tawhid, house/abode of monotheism) is a term used by Muslim scholars to refer to those countries where Muslims can practice their religion freely, (<http://en.wikipedia.org>).
7. Aziz Ahmad, *Studies in Islamic Culture in the Indian Environment*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1964.
8. (Way of living) It usually describes informal and temporary arrangements in socio-political affairs.

9. Khwand Mir, Habib al siyar, Bombay, 1857 (Iskandar Beg, Tarikh i Alam Ara-I Abbasi, Tehran, 1955) as quoted by Aziz Ahmad.
10. Ibid.....
11. Aziz Ahmad, Studies in Islamic Culture in the Indian Environment, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1964.
12. The Mughal King, (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki>)
13. Francois Bernier, Travels in. Mogul Empire A.D. 1656-1668, (Eng Tr.) A. Constable, New Dehli: S. Chand & Company, 1968., p.120
14. M. Ather Ali, The Mughal Nobility Under Aurangzeb, Dehli: Oxford University Press, 1997.
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17. Sidi, Ali Reis, 49;
18. Khalid Anis Ahmed, "History of Mughal Painting with special emphasis on the Timurid and Safavid influences on the Early Mughal Miniature," Central Asia: History Politics and Culture, Proceedings of the International Conference on Central Asia, (Ed.) Riazul Islam, Kazi A. Kadir & Javed Husain, Institute of Central and West Asian Studies, B.C.C & T. Press, University of Karachi, Karachi: 1999., p.238.
19. Muhammad Ziauddin, A historical study of Mughal Court, (1526-1707)

20. Mansura Haider, Indo-Central Asian Relations: From Early Times to Medieval Period, New Delhi: Manohar Publishers, 2004., p.81
21. Mansura Haider, Op. Cit. p.25.
22. Richard Foltz, quotes on the basis of a manuscript in the library of the Institute of Oriental Studies of the Uzbekistan Academy of Sciences.
23. Richard Foltz, Two Seventeenth -Century Central Asian Travellers to Mughal India, (Journal of Royal Asiatic Society).
24. Mutribi, p.17.
25. Mutribi (Ibid).
26. Ibid.
27. (The accounts of Mutribi have been produced on the basis of full text of Richard Foltz's article "Two Seventeenth-Century Central Asian Travellers to Mughal India", published in the Journal of Royal Asiatic Society).

