

Al-Biruni's Works on Indology: Historical, Cultural and Literary Significance

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Abstract:

Abu al-Reyhan Muhammad ibn Ahmad al-Biruni born at khuwarism Khurasan in Uzbekistan was a Muslim astronomer, mathematician, anthropologist, ethnographer, historian and geographer. He was also known as the father of Indology and was given the title of Ustad(Master). He was well versed in Indian astronomy as he had acquired its knowledge through Arabic translation of some Sanskrit texts. His fame as Indologist is primarily based on two of his Arabic texts," Tahqeeq ma lil hind" it includes all the lore that he could gather about India and its science, religion, literature and customs in 11th century. It is considered as encyclopedic work on India. Another text is "Tarjumat kitab I batanjali" Arabic translation of Patanjali Yogasutra, a collection of 196 Sanskrit sutras on the theory and practice of yoga. This paper aims at highlighting the historical, cultural and literary importance of these works by al Biruni as they convey the true Indian science to the Islamic world. It focuses on analyzing the interactions between Muslims and Hindus during the 11th century with reference to al-Biruni's encyclopedic work on India. It also analyzes the significance of translating Patajali yogasutra into Arabic as it out spreads a traditional healthy practice of India to the Arabic knowing people.

Key Words: Al-Biruni, Indology, Arabic works, tahqeeq ma lil hind, tarjumat kitab batanjali, Muslim world.

Introduction: India due to its alluring ecological and geographical features, delightful rich culture, and composite ethnicity has always attracted rulers, invaders, travelers and scholars from around the world who came to India with a variety of objectives. Among them was a traveler whose visit became historic for ages because his visit to India symbolized a sincere effort to know its people, culture and scientific attainments. It was Abu Reyhan Muhammad Bin Ahmad Al-Biruni. Born at Khuwarism Iran in 973 C.E, he was conversant in Turkish, Persian, Sanskrit, Hebrew, Syriac, and Arabic in which he wrote. Though Persian was his mother tongue, he paid his utmost attention to acquiring mastery over Arabic language and its literature, because he was highly impressed with its tremendous fund of knowledge.(Badr

p162). He excelled in many fields which include astronomy, mathematics, chronology, physics, medicine, mineralogy, anthropology, ethnography, religion and history. Not much is known about his early life, education and family but through his work it is reckoned that Al-Biruni was a man of character and virtues. He would so often say that human values lie in personal qualities and deeds not in high lineage, greatness and renown of the family.(Badr p161). Apparently Al-Biruni accompanied Mehmud Ghaznavi in 1017 C.E on his invasion into India as a court astrologer but indeed his curious nature and quest for knowledge attracted him to India. He was deeply interested in astronomy and mathematics and considered Indians well versed in both. (E. Sachau). He had acquired the knowledge of Indian astronomy through translations of some Sanskrit texts into Arabic and after coming to India he learned and mastered Sanskrit with the help of pundits with the aim in view to study India's vast literature which was mostly in the said language (Sachau preface p xxxv) Which enabled him to understand India and its culture from the perspective of Indians His encyclopedic work on India "tahqeeq ma lil hind" (English translation: al-birunis India) makes him an Indologist as it contains everything related to India. As mentioned earlier, Biruni had acquired mastery in Sanskrit; his command over Sanskrit reached a point where, with the aid of pundits, he was able to translate some Indian books into Arabic and Arabic into Sanskrit. One of them is Patanjali yoga sutra, in which Biruni along with the translation of yoga-sutra added a commentary of his own. Both these books are the most valuable contribution of any Muslim social scientist in the field of indology.

Tahqeeq Ma Li'l Hind and its Significance:

Accompanying Mehmud Ghaznavi on his invasion into India in 1017C.E, Al-Biruni stayed there for few years and became acquainted with all things related to India. Having acquired almost all the knowledge about India he undertook the task of writing a book objectively on India, its people and culture with reference to its own classic literature thereby eliminating the possibility of being accused of misrepresentation, he himself informs us (E Sachau) . He named the book " tahqeeq ma li'l hind min maquleh maqbuleh fil aql aw marduleh" which means "the book confirming what pertains to India, whether rational or despicable" (Lawrence 1989) completing it around 1030 C.E divided into 80 chapters. As the title indicates Al-Biruni has recounted all the reasonable and unreasonable practices of Indians in his book. It has been translated into English by Edward Sachau as "Al-Biruni's India". The sources of information utilized by Al-Biruni include a vast number of Sanskrit books, he also gathered some information through

intensive travels around the country meanwhile difficulties faced by him are also recorded in his book which include language barriers, difference in religious beliefs and practices, self absorption and consequent insularity of local population constitute, hostile behavior of Hindus towards all foreigners because during 11th century they suffered waves of destructive attacks on many of Indian cities by the hands of Muslim armies.(Khan 1976). He also sought help of Indian scholars for better understanding of Sanskrit literature. His book deals with the very basis of Hindu religion, literature, science, philosophy, social organization, geography, astronomy, life, customs, festivals etc. There is hardly a subject which he left untouched. While Biruni claims of being objective in representing India Dr. Vinay Kumar Gupta is of the view that he could not completely free himself of his proud Khwarzamian Islamic origin and at times viewed Indian practices with disgrace as is clear from his usage of words like haughty, foolishly vain, self conceited, and stolid for the Hindus in general terms. He also writes that Biruni refrained himself from going into details of Mahmud's exploits of India and the great devastation he caused on Indian Territory. Along with these statements he adds that in spite of these shortcomings Biruni's account is an invaluable source of information of India. (Gupta, p67). Another scholar M S Khan is of the view that Al Biruni tried to be as honest as possible in his writing. During his journey to India military and the political history was not the main focus of Al Biruni. Instead he decided to document the more civilian and scholarly areas of Hindu life such as culture, science and religion. (Khan 1976). Similarly Mohammad Yasin compares it to "a magic island of quiet, impartial research in the midst of a world of clashing swords, burning towns, and plundered temples".(Yasin p19)

Although many scholars have given their valuable interpretations of the book, there is a need to highlight its historical, cultural and literary significance in the context of Indo-Arab relations. This book can be considered as the historical initiative by a social scientist towards betterment of relationship, during 11th century, between two such nations who had discord among themselves and viewed each other degradingly. Through this book Al-Biruni made an attempt to transmit true scientific knowledge enshrined in India to West Asia and by making a sincere effort to explore Indian culture wins over the confidence and trust of Indians which was indeed a difficult task being a Muslim scholar. Al-Biruni gives account of certain festivals, books, events about which other sources don't provide information. For instance he records a festival celebrated in Kashmir named as "Agdus". (Ahmad p233) he names books like "dadhi- sagara" a Buddhist account. Many such instances are found in the book which is of historical significance. Through this book Al-Biruni made West Asia familiar with the culture

of India. Strange customs and the rituals practiced by the people of India, flora and fauna of the country not known to the outside world, geography and nature of the subcontinent, beautiful and incredible India can be seen in the book which is rich in socio-cultural inputs and perspectives. This book was first translated into German by Edward Sachau and then into English by the same author in 1872. Since then it has been translated into Russian, Urdu, Hindi and Bengali thus adding to the literature of all these languages. Mohammad Qasim is of the view that tahqeeq is first book providing a true insight and authentic knowledge about India to the group of Arabic knowing people (Qasim p56-155).

Tarjumat Kitab Batanjali and its Significance:

This book is a collection of 196 Sanskrit sutras about the theory and practice of yoga. It is believed to be compiled by saint Patanjali but there is discord regarding the author among scholars and the fact still lies in darkness. The basic meaning of yoga is unity of soul, body and mind. This practice help improve one's physical and mental health. Yoga tradition holds the patanjali yogasutra to be one of the foundational texts of classical yoga philosophy. It's a classical practice having its roots in Indian tradition. But Al-Biruni along with the translation of this book tried to prove the connection of yoga philosophy with Islamic monotheistic theology. In the second chapter of book tahqeeq ma Li'l Hind he quotes from patanjali about Monotheism (E Sachau p27) passages from this book are extracted by Al-Biruni in connection with numerous topics like the nature of God, the path of moksa, eight miraculous powers attained by the yogin etc. Al-Biruni translated this classical Indian text into Arabic, with the help of some Hindu scholars, before writing his encyclopedic work on India. His translation included the text and a hitherto unknown Sanskrit commentary.(Pines and Gelblum p302-325). Yoga has been a popular practice in India since ages and was made popular by swami vivekanand in the 19th century in India as well as West Asia.(white p xvi). Through Arabic translation, Al-Biruni introduced Yoga to the Arab world. Al-Biruni's attempt of linking Indian traditional practice with that of Islamic Monotheistic philosophy helped in drawing attention of Muslim world towards Indian tradition besides preserving many core themes of yogic philosophy . Quoting from this book very often in his works he let Indians speak for themselves through their classical texts which makes his work more authentic and reliable. It was the most translated ancient Indian text in the medieval era, having been translated into about forty Indian languages and two non- Indian languages. (White 2004)

Conclusion:

Al-Biruni as an Indologist played a significant role, through his works, in bringing West Asia and India closer in 11th century. Making a sincere effort of studying Indian culture and representing India in its truest form to West Asia, he was able to eradicate a narrow mind set, to some extent, of both the nations towards each other. Through *Tahqeeq ma lil Hind* Al-Biruni introduced scientific knowledge of India and its people to the Arab world and adding critical assessment of Islamic monotheistic theology to the translation of Patanjali Yoga Sutras tried to define similarity of ideology of Indian Hindus and Arab Muslims. To sum up we can conclude that Al-Biruni works on Indology provided a course in the betterment of relations between India and the Arab world. Students of History, Anthropology, Ethnography, Indology, and other fields avail from his works till today.

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