

Al-Biruni: The Great Pioneer of Indology

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Abstract:

Alberuni should be revisited and reread. Both Alberuni himself and his book: 'Tahghigh ma lil Hind' translated, edited, annotated, and titled in English by Edward Sachau: 'Alberuni's India' in modern and academic sense] are complex, multidisciplinary, abstract and concrete both. What is significantly sorrowful is in fact Alberuni is tried to be absolutely ignored and misjudged as the first and modern mythologist by contemporary mythologists and their colleagues while the subject, terminology, suggestions, hints, and signs in several chapters of his 'India' hand over, and connected to, myths and mythology. This is what, presumably, university graduate students: undergraduates and postgraduates both must appear to, and go through and see it in depth. The paper, necessarily, is also to exploit and emphasize mythological trends and components of ALBeruni's writing. What else this paper would like to do is to explore to what extent the claim or hypothesis of Abu Reihan Alberuni being the mythologist, with his book, does have an approach to mythology of its own. It is also to persuade academics and scholars to investigate why Alberuni should, to such an extent, be ignored as the great pioneer of Indology.

Key Words: *Alberuni, IndoPersian, Literature, Knowledge, Myth, Deities, Rig Veda, multidisciplinary, approach*

I. Introduction

The Indus Valley civilization dates to 5000 BC when rest of the world was living mainly as nomadic forest dwellers. Since those

times, the word "India" is synonymous with an array of superstitions and myths. The contribution of ancient India to various forms of knowledge; from medicine to fine arts and from astronomy to chemistry

cannot be overemphasized. The first university was established in Taxila in 700 BC. Many historians tried to explain “India” but it was Alberuni who, for the first time presented it in its true sense. Ever since its completion in early 11th century, no account on India is complete without the reference of Alberuni's “Kitab-ul-Hind”.

Abu Rehan Muhammad Ibn Ahmad al Beruni was born near Khiva, a part of Khawarzem. He spent some time in Tibristan under the patronage of Shamsul Maali Qabus, whom he dedicated his book ‘Aasar-ul-Baaqia’. Sultan Shamsul Maali was a great patron of knowledge and art but an arrogant ruler. That’s why when the King of Khawarzem invited him to his court, Alberuni didn’t hesitate to accept the offer. It was in the court of King Abul Abbas Mamoon, that he met Bu Ali Sina (Avicenna) and the two great scholars exchanged their views of different aspects. That was a time of turmoil and the Kingdom of Khawarzem was destroyed by Mahmood of Ghazni and on the request of new ruler, Beruni was shifted to Ghazni. For the rest of his life, he was associated with Ghaznavid dynasty and it was the time when he travelled to India for the first time

and developed interest in Indian culture. Afterwards, he visited India many times and spent most of his time. learning Sanskrit and studying old Indian manuscripts, many of which he translated to Arabic. After the death of Mahmood, he remained associated with his son Masood to whom he dedicated his famous book on astrology “al Qanun al Masoodi fi al-Hai'a wa al-Nujum”. He died around 1048 and was buried in Ghazni.

Alberuni was a frequent traveller, prolific writer, honest historian and a true scientist. Despite his true translation and description of Hindu manuscripts, he frequently compares Indian literature with that of Greek and rejects the superstitions wherever he thinks so. He challenged, questioned and spoke against existing norms. For example, according to Hindu mythology, the earth is the centre of the universe and all planets including sun revolves around the earth. But he very clearly debated the misconception and tried to convince his contemporaries centuries before Galileo and Copernicus that earth not only revolves around its axis but also around the sun. His description of solar and lunar eclipse is similar to our understanding today. Similarly, he

experimented, wherever he thought necessary to prove or disprove prevailing beliefs.

He wrote a number of books on various subjects. According to some historians, number of books written by Alberuni exceeds 200 including 20 books on India alone. In "Aasar-ul-Baqiya", Alberuni correlates ancient history to geographical locations. "Qanun al Masoodi" is the encyclopaedia on astronomy, trigonometry and solar and lunar motions. "Al Jamahir fi Maarfat al Jawahir" describes properties of precious stones. "Kitab -al-Saidana" is a treatise of Arabic and Indian medicine. "KitabalTafheem" discusses mathematical problems.

Alberuni's contribution to the various fields of science cannot be overemphasized. He not only described the rotation of earth, but also calculated the diameter of earth and described latitude and longitude of various places. Based on his knowledge of geography and astronomy, he explained why the sun never sets on North or South Poles. He also accurately calculated densities of 18 stones. He not only gave clear account of Indian numerals but also developed a

method of trisection of angles. He explained the phenomenon of natural springs and correlated movement of ocean currents to the position of the moon. He described even different methods to find north and south directions as well as a mathematical formula to predict start of different seasons. He was one of the very first scientists to describe that the speed of light far exceeds that of sound.

Although his contribution to various fields of science is of tremendous value but his most important contribution is "Kitab ul Hind" or the Book of India. Before him, the existing books were composed of biased opinion. The book was written on the request of his teacher to provide a "true account of Hindus so that it could be helpful to the people for discussion as well as to travellers". He himself described the purpose of the book to describe Hindu writings in its original form. But he also added many references from Greek and Christian resources for the comparison.

In his book, he describes the difficulties faced by him to learn Sanskrit and Hindu manuscripts. The most important factor was that he was not only a non-Brahman but also part of the Ghaznavid Army

invading the holy land of Hindus. At that time, learning of Sanskrit and mastery of knowledge was divine right restricted to Brahmans only. Moreover, He being the Muslim, was mistrusted and considered “Maleech” or unholy and the ancient secrets were to be guarded from him. And it was not only the forbidden knowledge, but also the complexity of the language itself that forbade foreigners to gain anything from the ancient Hindu manuscripts. But it was his perseverance that not only he learnt but mastered those subjects to such an extent that he was considered magician and was honoured by being called as “Saagar” meaning ocean.

According to Alberuni, the main hindrance in learning was the “rasmulkhat” or script in addition to sounds not represented in Arabic alphabets. Moreover, there were many synonyms for the same word and the text was in poetry and to the ancient writers, poetic sense was far more important than the knowledge itself.

The Kitab-ul-Hind is the first treatise hatred on Hindu religion, knowledge, traditions and culture in any foreign language. Since its first edition, it has been widely welcomed, quoted and translated in

various languages. From Akbar's Ian-e-Akbari to modern journals, Kibul-ul-Hind forms one of important references. The book is widely respected not only for its contents but also impartiality and honesty. Macaulay described Miller's history of British India as the second-best book on history after Gibbon but Sen has severe reservations as he describes the book being written by a dominant colonial perspective as compared to Alberuni's Kitab-ul-Hind which honestly describes achievements of Indian scholars.

Kitab-ul-Hind contains very interesting information. For example, according to Alberuni, Hindu religion believes in one God and the idol worship is because of ignorance as most of the people do not have access to the religious books. The main reason for this ignorance is monopoly of Brahmans over the religious matters and linguistic complexity of the manuscripts. He also describes Hindus as a separate entity from Muslims and their prejudice and towards all non-Hindus specially Muslims. In this regard, he may be considered as the pioneer of two-nation theory. The book also describes geography, economy, history, politics, culture and traditions of Indians as well as

their beliefs and excerpts from scientific books. Indeed, this is very first comprehensive encyclopaedia of “mysterious India”. Robinson has truly named Alberuni as the “Founder of Indology”.

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