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Al Biruni's India; Investigating Other's perception

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Abstract-

Al Biruni's description of 11th Century India is an unique account as it is a valuable source to understand how an outsiders think about contemporary India. He was a person of scholarly bent of mind having a sharp observing eye for details and his account is relatively unbiased. He wrote about Hindu philosophy, theology and way of life and at the same time does not hesitate to mention that the invading army of Islam had inflicted such destruction on the Hindus that they developed an aversion towards the Muslims.

Key words- belief, conceit, other, philosophy, religion.

Introduction-

"Sultan Mahmud and Al Biruni symbolize two different aspects of the contact between the Indian and the Islamic civilization. While the former stands for the immediate external and destructive results the latter represents the long term, internal and constructive impact" (Ahmad, xxxii)

The original name of Al Biruni (973-1049 A.D.) was Abu Raihan Muhammad Ibn Ahmad. He was born in the territory of Khwarizm in. He was called Al Biruni because he was born in the suburban area of the city. Biruni is a Persian word meaning 'of or belonging to the outside' (Ahmad, XVI)

He was of the Iranian origin but not much is known about his childhood. He was a great linguist and prolific writer. Besides his mother tongue Khwarizmi (An Iranian dialect with strong Turkish influence) he knew Hebrew, Syriac, Arabi, Persian and Sanskrit (Ahmad, Xvii). Through translation he also got acquainted with the Greek philosophy.

Sultan Mahmud of Ghazni (999-1030) invaded and annexed Khwarizm and Al Biruni was taken to Gazani. His position in the court of Sultan Mahmud is not clear. He was some sort of hostage but honored for his scholarship. (ibid XVIII) but probably his relations with the Sultan was not cordial as he refers to Sultan only on few occasion in his book on India titled 'Kitab Fi Tahqiq Ma Lil Hind Min Maqala Maqbola Fil Aql Ao Mardhula' which is popularly known as 'Kitabul Hind' (Ahmad, XVI) though the book was written during the period of Mahmud.

Al Biruni must have had access to many important Indian books translated into Arabic. The extent of the subject dealt by him in his book is enormous. How many years he stayed in India and which parts of the country he had visited is not certain but he stayed in Punjab. (Ahmad, XIX)

Al Biruni introduces his book as 'An accurate description of all categories of Hindu thought as well those which are admissible as those which must be rejected.'

In the introductory essay Al Biruni mentions the difficulties of having an objective record which almost sound like an extract from the modern historiography book. He says that the reporter is influenced by divergent interest and all kinds of antipathies between the various nations. He also narrates the reason for a reporter telling lies. A narrator may tell a lie for lauding his family or nation and attack the family or nation on the opposite side. Somebody may tell a lie with the intention of gaining some profit. Someone may tell a lie with the intention of gaining some profit. Someone may tell a lie from ignorance blindly following others. (Ahmad, 4)

Al Biruni's account of India is translated into English by Dr. Edward C. Sachau and the abridged version of the translation edited by Qeyamaddin Ahmad is published by National Book Trust. This paper is mainly based on it.

Difficulty of understanding India-

In the first chapter titled 'on the Hindus in general, An introduction to our account of them' he expresses the difficulty of understanding India. According to him first barrier in understanding India is Sanskrit language which is,

"...of an enormous range both in words and inflections" (Ahmad, 7)

He also expresses difficulty in translation from Sanskrit to Arabic.

He also points out errors made by the Indians while copying the manuscripts.

"Indian scribes are careless and do not take pain to produce correct and well-collated copies" (Ahmad, 8)

According to him the barrier that prevents foreigners from understanding Hinduism is fanaticism directed against all foreigners who are called '*mleccha*' i.e. impure by them. They forbid having any connection with them because thereby they think they would be polluted. Anything of the Hindus that touches the fire and water of the foreigners is considered as

impure and once something has become impure it cannot be purified or recovered. They do not receive anybody who does not belong to them, even if he wished it or inclined to their religion. According to him this makes it difficult to establish connection with them and creates gulf. (Ahmad, 9)

He mentions about the radical differences of manners and customs "...in all manners and usages they differ from us to such a degree as to frighten their children with us" (ibid) But he also admits that similar dislike for the foreigners is common to all nations.

The destruction caused by the Muslim invaders is also one of the causes that created a gulf between the Hindus and the Muslims. Mentioning Mahmud Gazani's invasion he writes,

"Mahmud utterly ruined the prosperity of the country.....by which the Hindus became like atoms of dust scattered in all directions.....Their scattered remains cherish, of course the most inveterate aversion towards all Muslims" (Ahmad, 10)

He says that due to this reason the Hindu sciences have retired far away from the places conquered by the Muslims.

The Self Conceit of the Hindus-

The self conceit of the Hindus is also mentioned as one of the reason that creates barrier. He writes,

"Hindus believe that there is no country like theirs, no science like theirs. They are haughty, foolishly vain, self-conceited and stolid" (ibid)

He says that the Hindus are niggardly in communicating their knowledge. They not only withhold it from the foreigners but also from the men of another caste. (ibid)

He states that the Hindus do not believe that besides them anybody have any knowledge and if somebody tells them about some scholars from other country, they will think that you are a liar. He also says that if the Indians travelled and mixed with the people of other nations, they would soon change their mind and the ancestors of the Indians were not as narrow minded as the present generation.

He also admits that the Greeks also held the same opinion before the rise of Christianity. But there were philosophers like Socrates, who remained faithful to the truth and died for their convictions. He says that among the Hindus there are no men who were willing to bring sciences to classical perfection. As a result he feels that science is in a state of utter confusion and mixed with the silly notion of the crowd. He compares the mathematical and astronomical literature of the Hindus as, "Mixture of costly crystals and common pebbles" (Ahmad, 12)

Hindu Belief-

In the second chapter titled, 'On the belief of the Hindus in God', he makes comparison between the beliefs of the educated and uneducated among the Hindus. The educated strive to conceive the abstract ideas but the common masses do not pass beyond the apprehension of the senses. According to the Hindu belief, the God is,

"Eternal, without beginning and end, acting by free will, almighty, all wise" (Ahmad ,13)

But he finds that the ideas about the God among the common masses are rather repulsive.

"Hideous fictions are sometimes met with among the Hindus, especially among those castes who are not allowed to occupy themselves with science" (Ahmad, 15)

Commenting on the differences of the religious beliefs among the educated and uneducated Hindus, he writes,

".....the educated among the Hindus abhor anthropomorphisms of this kind, but the crowd and the members of the single sects use them most extensively" (Ahmad , 18)

Al Biruni's intensive study of the Hindu scriptures is obvious as he describes different concepts like Purusha (the supreme soul), Prakriti (the nature with its three qualities i.e. Sattva, Raj and Tam, the *Panchamahabhuta* (the five great elements that makes Prakriti namely heaven, wind, fire, water and earth)

In the IVth Chapter he describes Hindu belief about how the soul is connected with matter. He describes 'Sankhya' philosophy and according to it how soul is just a witness to what is happening to matter. According to him belief in metempsychosis i.e. transmigration of soul is central to Hindu religion. (Ahmad, 25)

In the VIth chapter he describes the Hindu concepts of 'Swarga' and 'Narka' i.e. heaven and hell, where the people are rewarded or punished for their deeds. Concept of 'Moksha', i.e. liberation is described by him as different that the heaven. The soul gets bound to this material world due to ignorance and can be liberated by overcoming ignorance. (Ahmad, 32)

Cupidity and wrath are mentioned as the greatest and the most pernicious enemies of man that deludes him. (Ahmad, 33)

He elaborates on the different ways of attaining 'Moksha' i.e. liberation including the way of devotion mentioned in the Gita. (Ahmad, 36)

He also describes the different mythical beings mentioned in the Hindu scriptures like Devas, Daityas, Gandharvas etc. (Ahmad, 40)

He also writes that the some of the actions of the Devas are objectionable, but if they are compared with the Greek ideas about Gods, they will no longer appear strange. (Ahmad, 43)

Chapter XI describes about the rationale behind the idol worship. Abstract thoughts are understood only by highly educated people who are very few and common people only comprehend pictorial representations. (Ahmad, 51)

His objective analysis about the prevalence of idol worship proves that he was not bigoted. His extensive knowledge about other religion is obvious as he says that this kind of pictorial representation of the divine also existed among the Jews and Christians. He also admits that if a picture of prophet, Mekka or Kaba is made and shown to an uneducated man or woman that will also generate devotion. The inclination of imagining divinity in pictorial form is deep rooted in the Human nature.

He also mentions that the idol worship among the Hindus is prevalent among the low classes of people and those who are marching on the path of liberation, who had studied philosophy and theology would never dream of worshipping an image (Ahmad, 52)

Al Biruni also gives details given by Varahamihira about the idol making and the instructions about the idols of the different Gods.

He also mentions that the priest take an advantage of the simple folks as he writes,

“...the crowd is kept in the thralldom by all kinds of priestly tricks and deceits” (Ahmad, 56)

Commenting on the Vedas, he says that the Vedas means knowledge, but also states that the Brahmins recite the Vedas without understanding its meaning. (Ahmad, 57)

According to him, the Kshatriyas are taught the Vedas, but they are not allowed to teach it. The Vaishyas and the Shudras are not allowed to hear or pronounce the Vedas and if they do it, they are given harsh punishment like cutting of tongue. (Ahmad, 57)

Al Biruni gives an account of the Vedic literature namely the four Vedas, the Puranas and the Brahmanas. He also gives list of the different *Parvas* of the epic Mahabharata.

In the Chapter XLIII, Al Biruni describes about the Hindu concept of the Yugas and gives description about the *Krita*, *Trta*, *Dwapar* and *Kaliyuga*.

But the dichotomy exists in the belief system. He also quotes from the Bhagavad Gita, which mentions that for an intelligent man the Brahmana and the Chandala are equal. (Ahmad, 229)

The Caste System and social practices-

Chapter IX explains the caste system among the Hindus. He also mentions about the beliefs about creation of the Brahmana from the head of the God Brahma, the Kshatriya from the shoulders and hands etc and also gives description about *Antyaja* i.e. the people below the four Varnas comprising of fishermen and hunters.

He also mentions about the group of people like Chandala who were considered as illegitimate children born out of union of a Sudra father and a Brahmin mother. (Ahmad, 46)

He also mentions about certain practices like ‘Niyoga’, according to which a woman with the consent of her husband can have a child from a stranger. But this was no longer practiced. The belief about a wife being considered as a soil and property of the husband and prevalence of polyandry in Kashmir is mentioned by him. (Ahmad, 49)

In LXIII chapter, he describes the different ‘Ashramas’ which a Brahmana is expected to follow namely Brahmacharya, Grihstha, Vanprastha and Sanyasa. There were many restrictions on the Brahmins like they are expected to stay within the area with Sind river in the north and Carnavati in the south. (Ahmad, 227) Commenting on the rigidity of the caste system he says, “if a Brahman eats in the house of a Sudra for sundry days, he is expelled from his caste and can never regain it” (Ahmad, 247)

The scriptures are used to make Chaturvarna sacrosanct. Al Biruni mentions an episode from the Ramayana when Rama kills a Chandala who was engaged in austerities. As according to the Brahminical opinion a Chandala should not perform austerity. (Ahmad, 229)

Atrocities of Muslim rulers-

He also narrates the insult and atrocities inflicted by the Muslim conquerors. In Multan there was a sun temple and when Muhammad Kasim conquered Multan, he hung a piece of cow’s flesh on the neck of the idol and later on the idol was broken into pieces and the priest was killed. (Ahmad, 53)

He also mentions about the idol of Cakrasvamin from Taneshar and Shivlinga of Somnath lying in the hippodrome in Gazna. (ibid)

Information about the destruction of Somnath temple by Mahmud and also deliberate humiliation of the Hindus by keeping the part of the idols in front of the mosque of Gazani on which the people rub their feet to clean them from dirt is also mentioned by him. (Ahmad, 214)

Destruction inflicted by the Islamic armies wherever they went is also mentioned by Francois Bernier. (Lal, 108)

Hindu Science-

He have high praise for the knowledge of astronomy prevalent in India and mentions that the Hindu astronomers knowing that the moon eclipse is caused by the shadow of the earth and the sun eclipse is caused by the shadow of the moon. (Ahmad, 216)

The Hindus neglecting the systematic history writing is mentioned by him as,

“Unfortunately the Hindus do not pay much attention to the historical order of things. They are very careless in relating the chronological succession of their kings and when they are pressed for information and are at a loss, not knowing what to say, they invariably take to storytelling” (Ahmad, 193)

Conclusion-

Al-Biruni’s account of India during medieval period is one of the significant contributions to Medieval historiography. His analysis is objective. As he had knowledge about the Greeks as well, he was in a position to compare it with India. He frankly mentions about the shortcomings among the Hindus and also do not hesitate in mentioning that it is the violent attack of Mahmud which had driven the Hindus away from the Muslims. The discriminatory treatment that the Jews and Christian received in the Islamic state is well recorded. (Lewis, 174)

His comparison about the belief among the educated and uneducated Hindus indicates that he had good understanding of the Hindu scriptures and also interacted with the people.

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