

SCHOLARSHIP AS HERITAGE

Commonness Between India and Central Asia

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Abstract

India and Central Asia have maintained a historical relationship through the millennia. It is of significance to note that the Great Silk Road connected our peoples in the days of yore. The interconnectedness was prominent in the Pre-Islamic years, when Buddhism travelled from India to Central Asia and beyond and made its impact widely felt. The caravans carried goods and tradable items from India to Central Asia, brought back with them goods from China via the Taklamakan and Central Asia to India. And this exchange was going on a regular basis for centuries before Islam entered Central Asia and India. There was rapprochement and camaraderie in these interactions and relations flourished on the basis of mutual reciprocity. However, what made an indelible imprint in the minds of the people as sterling contribution of bilateral importance was the exchange of ideas, language, literature, religious sermons, methods of medical treatment, exchange of musical instruments and so on. Middle Ages hastened this cooperation between the two regions and took India's ties along the Silk Road to new heights when Islam came to India and Islamic culture began rapidly spreading. India was the mother of an ancient civilization, the fountainhead of Hinduism and Buddhism – two of the world religions. It was also a storehouse of knowledge and famous for mathematics, science and medicine. Indian scholarship was held in high esteem and Kautilya's Arthashastra was already making as much ripples the world over as the medical anthologies of Charaka and Susruta. The world required this knowledge and India was ready to disseminate them. The ancient universities in Nalanda and Taxila were famous in those times where scholars from China, Central Asia and other places came and interned in various disciplines and returned back to their countries armed with knowledge to disseminate it among knowledge seekers. India was alluring one and all from ancient times to the middle ages. With this background, this paper seeks to focus on some important hallmarks of knowledge spread in Middle Ages with specific reference to the Central Asian space and India's interaction with that area.

Keywords

Al-biruni, Architecture, South-Central Asia, Silk Road, Religion, Foreign Relations, Kitabul-Hind, Bilateral Ties, Mythology, Heritage.

Kautilya at the Source

Kautilya or Chanakya, as he is otherwise known, was an Indian scholar counselor to the kings of his time. As a mastermind of statecraft he wrote immortal injunctions to run a perfect state. His teachings have outlived the onslaught of time and conquests, sieved through the ages the principles of what a king should do and what he ought not do, while running the state. In Central Asia Mirzo Ulugbek's predecessor, Amir Timur and his successors Babur and Akbar had all must have followed what Kautilya had left behind. His famous classic *The Arthashastra* is a must read for any intellectual and administrator in any age. Given that the Central Asian space along the Oasis stretches of Amu Darya and Syr Darya, had flourished Bactrian, Sogdian, Scythian and Parthian empires before they were destroyed by Chengiz Khan, the science of statecraft was apparently very developed along the Kautilyan principles. Kautilya emphasized on ten major principles: 1. Perfect king, 2. A well-organized state, 3. Revenue sources and their judicious spending, 4. Civil services, 5. Branches of the government, 6. Law and justice, 7. Foreign policy and diplomacy, 8. Defence and war, 9. Covert operations and 10. Allied aspects.¹ From all these ten broad principles, Kautilya filtered his thoughts to six crucial directions of pursuing foreign relations, which are an essential manual for a contemporary diplomats. These six principles of foreign relations included:

- *Samdhi: Making a treaty, putting therein terms and conditions of war and peace.*
- *Vigraha: The policy of hostility.*
- *Asana: The policy of remaining quiet and not planning any march of expedition.*
- *Yana: The policy of Marching on Expedition.*
- *Samsarya: The policy of seeking shelter with another king.*
- *Dvaidhabhaba: Friendship with one king and hostility with another king at the same time. The principle is: Granted that your neighbor is your enemy; your neighbor's neighbor ought to be your friend.*²

These principles have transcendental values in time and space. Written some one thousand five hundred years ago during the Nanda and Maurya dynasty, Kautilya's theses on perfect statecraft was researched and first published in three volumes by a Professor of Bombay

University, R.P.Kangle, between 1960 and 1965. They contained: Firstly, a definitive, critically edited text with precise numbering of sutras and verses, Secondly, an English translation with detailed notes which took into account all other prior translations and Thirdly, an exhaustive study. Kautilya was earlier translated by R. Shamasastri of Mysore, which was published 1904 and 1915, first the text and then the English version respectively. Besides, there has been Sanskrit commentaries on Kautilya's work many times in the past, most famous being the commentaries by T. Ganapati Sastri.

Kautilya wrote his theses in Sanskrit, the ancient Indian language, which is considered as mother of other Indo-European and Asian languages. It was primarily in verse form that has been appreciated, adored and translated into English and other languages. A German translation by J.J. Meyer as well as a Russian translation exists apart from many Indian languages. His teachings were as much moral as ethical and defined the code of conduct for the King and his subjects, thereby dealing with many issues of statecraft and good governance. In the particular context of conquests that had happened quite frequently in ancient and Middle Ages, Kautilya had never lost his significance. These principles also were applied to all those expeditions of Timurid and Baburid rulers, who came all the way to India to conquer and rule. What holds today good is the versatile heritage value of these immortal principles.

Kautilya wrote that there was great belief in astrology and similar predictive sciences as well as in the occult sciences of witchcraft, sorcery and black magic. Without the knowledge of Mathematics, such deeds were impossible to practise and it shows clearly that ancient and medieval India was famous for mathematics and related sciences with its contribution "0" to the numerical that revolutionized the entire process of calculations.³

India in the Eyes of Al-Biruni

Al-Biruni was one among the first orientalist who brought to the Central Asian space the distinctive narratives about India of his time. He wrote 80 chapters on various aspects of the Hindu way of life, their religion, practices, yoga, the calculations of time and space that he saw for himself as practiced in India and various other aspects of life in India.⁴ Al-Biruni lived through a fertile time of creative production and

singlehanded brought the two people understand each other. He ushered in an era of rapprochement between the peoples of South and Central Asia as well as West Asia. Coming from Central Asia and straddling a space bordering Persia and then coming to India they cultivated the virgin fields of confluence in bilateral and multilateral relations between the regions through which they passed.

Al Biruni is considered 'as the first of scientific indologists', who tried his best to understand India sympathetically and to present India to the people of his country in a manner they would better appreciate it. He took enormous pains to pen down his book famously known as *Kitabu'l Hind*. Born in 973 AD in the outskirts of Khorezm, then under the Samanid ruling dynasty of Transoxiana and Persia and now Khiva province of Uzbekistan, Al Biruni demonstrated his skills in linguistics and learning languages. He was also an astronomer and astrologer and had deep knowledge of Arabic and Persian and learned Sanskrit to understand India. He himself has mentioned consulting Sanskrit manuscripts. The way he has depicted the Indian panorama to the people of his own country is too marvelous to describe. That's why *Kitabu'l Hind* has remained the masterpiece in literature in Persian, Arabic, English and many other Central Asian languages.

How Al Biruni captured the imagination of other linguists the world over is evidenced by the simple fact that his exhaustive notes on India were first published in English in two volumes in London in 1888 under the patronage of the India Office in London. Once the text and its English translation were in the public domain, popularity for the book poured in and endeared the book to the public. By 1926-1928 his book was already translated into Hindi in Allahabad by the Indian Press Limited. The fact that Al Biruni traversed through the treacherous terrain of Hindukush and came to India to study the country and its peoples, their religions and their traditions, their social mores and practices, their rivers and their oceans, their philosophy, their scientific literature and civil laws, their social organizations and manners, their geography and weather, their festivals and rituals and all the details of weight and measurement, astrology, astronomy and many related subjects evince the reader about the inquisitiveness of the man. He indeed knitted the true fabric of bilateral ties between the peoples of South and Central Asia with India being the gateway to the East. He devoted altogether 80 chapters to eighty different subjects some of which have been stated

above and other subjects are too obviously important in the content of *Kitabu'I Hind*. The book is considered as a masterpiece of Indological literature and preserved with great care in the libraries of India, Central Asia and elsewhere. The book inspires the youngsters to hark back to the literary heritage of our past and draw inspiration for the future.

Al Biruni's knowledge of India was too intimate to describe. He wrote about Magadha and Kalinga, Avanti (Ujjain) and Sindhu, Madura and Kulinda. All these are parts of India. He also wrote about Lanka and Ramayana, Dasarath and Rama and Ravana thereby implying that he knew Indian history and culture in detail, understood the essence of India's mythology in its proper spirit. In fact he wrote more about India than any of his contemporaries and more about India than about his native Khorezm. In reality by virtue of hailing from Central Asia, Al Biruni was the connect between the East and the West and between the north and the South.

Writers at the Forefront

Of all the arts in which the humans excel, nature's best masterpiece is to write well. Therefore writers of repute – whether they wrote religious scriptures or novels - occupy a central place in the historical and cultural annals as literary heritage of any country. The wealth they create is permanent and immortal. Writers depict the social order, social mores, economic system, human behavior, prevalent customs and practices and many more things including nature, environment, science, space, mythology and what not! If reading habits of individuals are any indication, the writers are at the roots of it. For a writer to choose a theme and pen a novel or poem the field is vast and versatile, the sky is the limit for character creation and narratives, nature provides the breadth of the milieu. What makes them last long and live forever is the presentable way they portray their characters. From short stories to big novels, from anthologies to plays, writer's creativity endears them to the people. The Chilean poet Pablo Neruda is as popular as Alisher Navoi of Uzbekistan and Patrick White of Australia.

The transcendental values of some of the epic works created in the Middle ages by its rulers like the Babur nama and Din Elahi by Akbar from the Moghul years continue to inspire people because their contributions have heritage value in literature. The former inspires people in the direction of mutual understanding while the later portrays

the basic principles of multi-religiosity and secular ethos. The authors are no more with us, but their work remains of sterling importance. If they left behind the written heritage of the Baburid epoch as their spiritual contribution, their farsightedness left behind a material culture that stands tall today across northern part of India, mainly in the vicinity of Delhi and Agra. Many buildings of the Moghul era like the Red Fort, Jamma Masjid, Turkmen Gate, Delhi Gate, Humayun Tomb and Taj Mahal are all evidence of it. Most of these monuments are Heritage sites declared by the UNESCO.

Babur became the king of Samarkand at the age of 12. He trekked his journey along the Silk Road from Andijan where he was born to Samarkand, which he ruled. Samarkand became the crossroads of uniting three Asias –Central, West and South Asia. In the city of Samarkand he planned his future strategy of conquests and marched with his soldiers from Central Asia, toward the Hindukush. In those distant years Hindustan was divided from Central Asia by the Hindukush mountains. Having crossed the Hindukush, he ferried through River Indus and entered into mainland Hindustan. His conquest of India heralded in a period of Baburid rules over Hindustan. His successors embarked upon a great journey of construction – building edifices and monuments that remained through the passage of time architectural marvels of India. Thereby these Baburids proclaimed the sum total of their contribution to the common cultural space they shared with India and India shared with them. Some of these buildings are masterpieces of cultural synergy between the two regions –Central Asia and South Asia.

This common cultural space extended from Samarkand to Bukhara to Kandahar to Delhi and beyond. They also extended to Xinjiang and Mongolia and farther to eastern Siberia. Not far away from the city of Ulan Ude one finds today, functional Buddhist monasteries preserving Buddhist era palm leaf inscriptions in special libraries. A religion that was born in India traveled along the Silk Road running through Bukhara and Samarkand to many countries because of its appeal and popularity. Similarly the spread of Islam in the 7th-12th centuries was swift and all embracing. As a result we find today a sizeable Indian population spread all over India and continuing to espouse Islam as their confession.

In the immediate neighborhood of India there are three major Islamic countries- Pakistan, Bangladesh and Afghanistan. They all belong to the same geo-cultural space and share the same heritage is evidenced

by the fact that all those who lived in Bangladesh today were Pakistanis before December 1971, before the country gained independence after a sanguinary war between India and Pakistan. Similarly all those who live in present day Pakistan before August 1947 were Indians ruled by the British. Likewise before the British came to India the Baburids were the rulers of Hindustan. They ensured a common geo-cultural space between two places through which they shuttled between – their homeland in Central Asia from where they came and India which they conquered and where they lived and ruled.

There was great interaction between the two regions along the very route through which Babur came to India. It added Indian dimension to the Silk Route. India was very developed in science and culture. The main thing that passed through this route was ideas and technology. Mathematics was India's forte. Indian artisans were very skillful and ready to disseminate their technical knowledge from fields ranging from architecture, pottery, terracotta art, paintings, building construction, material sciences, canal construction, astrology and astronomy and all those areas in which India was strong. In the Middle Ages, astrology, astronomy and mathematics played a cementing role between India and Central Asia in general and India and Uzbekistan in particular.

Mirzo Ulugbek's Contribution

The man who elevated the name of Uzbekistan in the science map of the world in the Middle Ages was none other than Mirzo Ulugbek, the noted astronomer of his time, whose team of disciples compiled the "Catalogue of the Starry Sky". For the first time they studied the behavioral pattern of 1018 stars and included them into the Catalogue thereby eliciting attention of the world to what the Ulugbek Madrassa/Observatory in Samarkand was doing. The Ulugbek Madrassa was the centre for exchange of ideas on mathematics and astronomy. It served as the cradle of lore in the days of yore and elicited numerous likeminded scholars from far and wide, who valued the work being done there. Ulugbek could enthuse a team of dedicated scholars, who devoted their time to study of stars.

Ulugbek believed: "the quest for knowledge is the duty of every Muslim man and woman". This particular sentence permeated across the Islamic world as a clarion call on the people to consider science as the only viable method to search for truth and solve the problems

facing the society. Scholars congregated in the Ulugbek Madrassa from various places because they believed that promotion of science was the only way to unravel the truth. He made Samarkand the centre of attraction for scholars and a fountainhead for dissemination of knowledge. As a result prominent scholars and mathematicians gathered around him. Since astronomy was closely a mathematical subject allied with astrophysics and astronomy, scholars interested in these disciplines searched for ways of cooperation in allied disciplines. Therefore, it would not be an exaggeration to say that an Uzbek was the founder of interdisciplinary science education in the Middle Ages. However, Ulugbek's main interest was in astronomy and in 1428, he set up the Ulugbek Observatory, which had no parallel in the world then.

Thus Samarkand as a city, as a centre of science learning and research on astronomy was catapulted to the world map – no mean achievement for a man who was supposed to be a king as descendant of Amir Timur. His contribution appalled the world, when the newly set up 15th century observatory not only deciphered the stars, but also exactly determined the length of the sidereal year: 365 days, 6 hours, 10 minutes and 8 seconds (with + 58 second tolerance). The observatory also accurately assessed tilt of the earth's axis at 23:52 degrees. These most accurate and precise measurement spurred the science world of Middle Ages, making Samarkand a science centre of the world. The sum total of Ulugbek's achievements could thus be said in a nutshell in three spheres: i. introduction of the new astronomical table, measuring the movements of 1018 stars, ii. fixing the exact length of the year; and iii. Introduction of interdisciplinary studies that encompassed astronomy, mathematics, astrophysics and astrology at a time when knowledge was scattered and studies were undertaken in an isolated manner. Finding interconnectedness of natural phenomena was not a mean achievement in the Middle Ages.

Although one could find more than a dozen institutions in Uzbekistan named after Mirzo Ulugbek, it is heartening to note that Ulugbek's contributions to astronomy is not limited to the observatory he set up in Samarkand but also to the domain of science knowledge in the world. The British and American scientists have recognized Ulugbek's contribution as much as the Russians, Indian and Latvians. In recognition of his contribution to providing new information about stars and planets, the Soviet government had released a postage

stamp of 5 Kopeek in 1987 with inscriptions “Uzbek Astronomer and Mathematician, Ulugbek (1394-1449). The Uzbek government has also immortalized his memory by adopting a similar measure and bringing out a postage stamp in 1994, while celebrating Mirzo Ulugbek’s 600th birth anniversary.⁵

Conclusion

Both Central and South Asia are a continuum in time and space, a continuum in action and creativity. The India connect is ancient. Middle Ages came in due course to contribute to the epoch in this process of continuum. And the process continues. Past achievements are of heritage value today and the present will go down in history far too into the future, when historians and scientists will talk about the IT growth in India and its contribution to scientific development and economic growth in Central Asia. The posterity is beholden to these people for the body of knowledge they have created and left behind. Imagine the creation of zero in India, the theory of Algebra by al Khorezmi, the theory of building observatories by Mirzo Ulugbek and all these three contribution put together is being used as cornerstone in the world of modern Mathematics and astrophysics, which is the proud inheritor of all these scientific legacies and heritage of the past. The interconnectedness is not only limited to mathematical sciences and allied disciplines; it is spread over to medicine, religion and many other fields that continue to serve the society even today.

Reference & Notes

- 1 Kautilya, *The Arthashastra*, Edited, Rearranged, Translated and introduced by L.N. Rangarajan, Penguin Books, New Delhi, 1987, p. 53.
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Kautilya, *The Arthashastra*, Edited by L.N. Rangarajan, Penguin Books, New Delhi, 1987, p.54.
- 4 Qetammuddin Ahmed, *India by Al-Biruni*, Abridged Edition of Dr. Edward C. Sachau’s English Translation, National Book Trust of India, New Delhi, 1983,
- 5 V.V.Barthold, *Ulugbek and His Time*, Vol.2, Pt.II, Moscow, 1964, pp 22-196.

