
**A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF DR. MUBARAK ALI'S APPROACH
TOWARDS THE HISTORICAL WRITINGS OF SINDH**

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ABSTRACT

The present article analyses the approach adopted by distinguished Pakistani historian Dr.Mubarak Ali towards the famous historical writings authored on Sindh by the different writers. The writings comprise noted Persian books written in the medieval period as well as the books written during early modern period by European officers and travellers etc., in English. He is extremely critical of all but one of the medieval era histories due to their apparent omission of the lives of common people. Only the royals, noblemen, religious and spiritual figures find a place in those records. On the other hand, he is all praise for the writings of British officials and other Westerners who gave deserving space to the commoners in their writings. This article aims to critically analyse this approach of Mubarak Ali when reading these texts.

Keywords: Ali, Persian, Common people, Chachnama, Tarikh Ma'sumi, Tuhfat-ul-Kiram, Nathan Crow, McMurado, Del Hoste

INTRODUCTION

Overview: Dr. Mubarak Ali (hereinafter "Ali") has remained extremely critical of the history books written in the medieval period in South Asia because the common people and their engagements are missing from such works. Against this backdrop, he has called into question the approach of the writers of *Chachnama*, *Tarikh Ma'sumi*, and *Tuhfatul-Kiram* etc. Conversely, he has celebrated European observers such as Nathan Crow, McMurado, and Del Hoste for their holistic approach while preparing their official reports, which now comprise important historical source materials. This essay explores

Ali's views on medieval and European accounts of Sindh and its people.

BIOGRAPHICAL DATA

Ali was born on 21st April, 1941 in the region of Tonk (Rajasthan), British India. He came to Hyderabad in Pakistan in 1947, along with his parents, and he received his early education there. He obtained an MA in General History from Sindh University, Hyderabad /Jamshoro, and later joined the same university as a lecturer. In 1976, he was awarded Ph.D. degree by Ruhur University, Germany. He took early retirement from the University in 1991. He has written, compiled and edited approximately a hundred books in English and Urdu languages. After his retirement Ali left Hyderabad, and he now resides in Lahore.

Ali and Medieval Historiographies of Sindh

Chachnama: According to Baloch (1983) *Chachnama* occupies a pre-eminent place in medieval Islamic historical writing, including with regard to Sindh. "The book remained lost for centuries and it fell into hands of Ali bin Hamid Kufi in 1216, who translated it into Persian" (p.1). In 1900, the celebrated writer Mirza Kalich Beg translated the book into English. Since the arrival of modern printing machinery in South Asia, many editions of *The Chachnama* along with its different translations have been published and mentioned in *Encyclopedia Sindhiana* (Vol.4). As discussed, the book has been published and edited by many learned authors; nonetheless, the two scholars can be singled out because they had knowledge of Arabic in addition to Persian: Pathan and Baloch.

Ali has written on comprehensive articles on the medieval historical writings of Sindh. In his article while commenting on *Chachnama*, Ali (2012) gave the following opinion:

"*Chachnama* is the most important source of Sindh's early history. However, *Chachnama* is merely a mixture of history and myth in the light of modern historians' research" (p.28).

Contrary to the opinion of Ali, Pathan(1978) has given following remarks about the *Chachnama*:

"It is a Persian work, is the most commonly used source on the history of Sindh specially as regards the pre conquest period of

the Brahman dynasty.... *Chachnama* contains an authentic and first-hand account of the conquest of Sindh at the hands of the Arabs.....some parts of *Chachnama*, however, comprise of exaggerated and false stories not supported by any other source” (p.15).

Furthermore, Baloch (1983) regarded *Chachnama* as the most reliable historical account of Sindh:

“It may even be regarded as the first truly historical work about historical events, “which took place during a known historical period, ever compiled in South Asian Subcontinent” (p.4).

It may be recalled here that the both above-narrated scholars were well versed in Arabic language and had direct access to the original Arabic sources which Ali lacked, and neither considered *Chachnama* to be a primarily mythological or fantastical, contrary to Ali’s claims. Indeed, the latter based his opinion about *Chachnama* on the opinion of “other writers” whom he failed to mention or cite in his article. Ali himself was well acquainted with Persian language, and he himself could have undertaken a textual analysis of *Chachnama* to highlight those parts of books which seemed to him as mythical rather than historical, but he has not taken the pain to do so. Furthermore, he has not shared the details of the modern research and the principles referred to as evidence for dismissing *Chachnama* as a fable.

***Tarikh Ma’sumi*:** Rashdi (1979) has opined that *Tarikh Ma’sumi* was written by Mir Ma’sum Bakhri during reign of Emperor Akbar (1556-1605). Bakhri was born in Sindh in 1538, and he grew up in Bakhar. He joined the Mughal imperial service in 1576, and enjoyed the patronage of Emperor Akbar. “He was appointed as Mughal jagirdar in Sindh, and was directed to help Khan-i-Khanan in his military operations against Mirza Jani Beg of Thatta in 1591” (p.159). His book is next to *Chachnama* in importance pertaining to history of Sindh. The details of different editions and translations of *Tarikh Ma’sumi* are entered into *Encyclopedia Sindhiana* (Vol.2).

Ali (2012) in his detailed article pertaining to history books written in Sindh, also adopted a critical approach to *Tarikh Ma’sumi*, as expressed in the following extract:

“In the capacity of Mughal functionary (*mansabdar*), Mir Ma’sum kept on fighting for the Mughal empire; hence, his book is replete with the events of wars in detail. However, there is

scarcity of literature on the administrative machinery and social and cultural history of the people. This state of affairs demonstrates that the noblemen and rulers were more interested in wars than in the administration. We come to know through this write-up that the noblemen had high esteem for *ulema* (religious scholars) and *sufis* (saints) because of their popularity among the masses. The policy of the ruling elites to appease *ulema* and *sufis* was aimed at securing their political interests. Most of the *ulema* sided with the conquerors and were granted estates and stipends as *quid pro quo* for their support” (p.30).

Evidence to support this Marxist analysis can be found in medieval manuscripts, but Ali relies on populist prejudice to support his claims, and he does not specifically identify any cases of scholars and *Sufis* on the payroll of Mughal empire in Sindh, not expound on how he obtained his in-depth knowledge of the inner, spiritual life of the noblemen he excoriates. This kind of unsubstantiated polemic is fine for the ranting of the tea house, but cannot be considered to constitute a serious literary-historical analysis. Furthermore, Ali has failed to take into account the fact that many of the *ulema* and *sufis* routinely patronized by the Mughal government were Persians and Central Asians, who were warmly welcomed by the state, often as refugees, and who subsequently made an indelible cultural and economic contribution to the life of the region.

However, many modern South Asian authors infused with nationalism view such patronage for “foreigners” as an unwelcome financial burden on the indigenous people of South Asia, and Rashdi (1979) complained of the cultural supremacy of Persians in Mughal society. He alluded to a case of Akbar sending Persians as his own ambassadors to the Shah, which caused the latter to query whether there were no natives capable of conducting diplomatic missions. Rashdi cited this as evidence of “The policy of neglecting the native people and adopting indifferent posture towards the local population ultimately annihilated the Mughal Empire in the long run” (p.220).

Tarikh Mazhar-i-Shah Jahani: According to Akhtar (2017) *Tarikh Mazhar Shah Jahani*, was written in Sindh by Mirak Yusuf during reign of the Mughal Emperor Shah Jahan (1628-1658). Mirak Yusuf’s father was a “Mughal *mansabdar* (*ranks*), and had served in Sindh in this capacity multiple times, and Yousuf himself was clearly

well-educated, as attested by the book” (p.92). Contrary to his opinions about the *Chchnama* and *Tarikh Ma'sumi*, Ali (1985) was favourably disposed to *Tarikh Mazhar Shah Jahani*:

“On this count, Mirak Yusuf’s book *Tarikh Mazhar Shah Jahani* is of supreme importance. The book contains a huge volume of information about the cultural and economic conditions of Sindh. Mainly, the book has comprehensively discussed the tribes living in Sindh during that time. *Mazahr Shah Jahani* is noteworthy because it was not written for enticing the favours of any king. Conversely, it was authored for the purpose of apprising the emperor about the corrupt practices of the government officers posted in Sindh” (p.1).

Ali’s commentary on the book is astute. The book was prepared by the author as petition for submission before the reigning emperor to apprise him of the state of affairs in Sindh, which was being acutely mismanaged by its Mughal administrators. As a result, the text of the book is quite different from courtly, literary manuscripts written in the same era. It is also surprising to note that the extent of barbarities perpetrated by local magnates must have been immense to inspire Mirak Yusuf to take up his pen and record the cruelties of his compatriots against the local populace. Although the book is not completely free from bias and prejudice against the native people, compared with the other historiographies it is, as Ali pointed out, a unique academic work.

Tuhfatul-Kiram: *Tuhfat-ul-kiram* was authored by Mir Ali Sher Qani’ during Kalhora period. The historian himself belonged to *Syed* community and he enjoyed the patronage of the Kalhora rulers of Sindh. His write-up is considered among the authoritative books produced in Sindh. Ali (2012) discussed *Tuhfatul-kiram* in the following passage:

“Mir Ali Sher Qani belonged to the *Sadat* community, and his family had settled in Sindh. As per the custom of that era, the rulers used to confer favours upon the members of *Sadat* community in form of feuds and emoluments; therefore, they had sympathetic policies towards the government. The history written by Mir Ali Sher Qani was divided into two parts: 1. One, pertaining to the history of rulers 2. Second is about the history of saints. Hence, we can deduce that Sindhi society was under political dominance of rulers and religiously and spiritually

under the paramountcy of *ulema* and *sufis*. But, the greatest losers in this setting, were the cultural and social history of Sindh, which was thoroughly neglected. Furthermore, his book is silent on the administrative set up of the state” (p.30).

Ali’s opinion about this book in the above excerpt is appropriate. However, this book was also written in a similar fashion to the rest of medieval histories that were produced. Besides, there was no tradition of writing about or giving importance to commoners, which is why they did not get special attention from court historians. Nonetheless, Ali has shied away from debating the figures that were near to the rulers of the age and their history. Besides, Ali could have analysed the book with a more thorough critical analysis.

ALI AND EUROPEAN WRITERS

Ali adopted a positive opinion towards works written about Sindh in English. He opined that the Westerners, especially the English authors, gave due importance to the common folks in their writings and official reports. Therefore, the eminent historian appreciated the foreign writers for recording the conditions of general populace which their Muslim predecessors failed to give due importance. In this context, Ali edited and published the works of three English writers: Nathan Crow, McMurado and Del Hoste. Moreover, he prepared a comprehensive volume under the title *A Social and Cultural History of Sindh*, which is based on the excerpts from the write-ups of numerous occidental authors about the seventeenth to nineteenth century Sindh.

Imperialism at Work: Crow’s Reports and Despatches on Sindh

The book was edited by Ali and published by Book Traders of Lahore. He gives a detailed introduction of political circumstances which compelled the British East India Company to send Nathan Crow to the Sindh court. The author, Nathan Crow, was a civil servant in the service of the Company, which deputed him on a mission to the court of the Talpur rulers of Hyderabad, and he remained in this official capacity for seventeen months, from August 1799 to May 1800. He submitted his official reports based on his observations of the Talpur-era Sindh to the Bombay government. By 1799, British had become the paramount political authority in South Asia, governed from their

centre in Calcutta, but Sindh was still not under their suzerainty. The Governor of Bombay, Jonathan Duncan, sent Crow to Sindh on the directions of the Viceroy, Marquis Wellesley. The primary motive of sending the diplomat was the fear of the Afghan king, Shah Zama, and his suspected intentions to invade India. The official despatches between the Bombay Governor and the civil servant are the primary source material on that period of history of Sindh. Ali (2004) gives the following opinion about the importance of the official account in the foreword of Crow's account of Sindh:

“His account of Sindh though written for the Bombay government, contains rich material on the history and culture of the 19th century Sindh. After a brief history of Sindh, he recorded his observation on the soil, climate, fruits, vegetables, animals, inhabitants, population, language, dress and the strength of army and the position of fortifications... What was written by Crow to enlighten the authorities of the East India Company has now become a part of history, and its study provides us an opportunity to understand the real motive of the British Raj” (pp.6-7).

It may be recalled here that the medieval historiographies were limited to writing on political matters, but Crow was the earliest writer who took up his pen to bring the common folks into discussion. Although, his write-up was not a history book, comprising as it did official reports for onward submission to the Viceroy of India, it occupies a foremost place as a source material on Sindh. Ali in the above passage gives credit to the officer for setting new trend by discussing common people in his official correspondence.

McMurado's Account of Sindh

The book was edited by Ali and published by the institute of Sindhology, Jamshoro. The writer, Captain James McMurado, was born in 1785 in Scotland and passed away in 1820 in India. He remained in military service of British East India Company from 1801 until his death. In 1812, he was appointed as Resident for the affairs of Cutch. He toured the borders and coasts of Cutch and Sindh and sent official reports based on the intelligence reports read with *Tuhfatul-Kiram*. The opinion of Ali (1985) about the official report is given in the following passage:

“McMurado’s *Account of Sindh*, is turning point in historiography of Sindh. While writing history of Sindh, he did not deal with the rulers but concentrated his research on the detail and description of the country, its climate, products, animals and the peoples. The history of the masses, which was generally ignored by court historians, is brought into limelight by McMurado” (p.3).

Contrary to the opinion of Ali, McMurado’s account of Sindh was an official dispatch rather than purely a historical work. The British officials had begun to contemplate the subjugation of the Indus valley by that time, so they were minutely studying it from each angle. This fact has been corroborated by the stance of the British historian Ansari (2007) in the following words:

“In the early 1800s, the main concern for the British was to control Afghanistan. Neighbouring territories under these circumstances, gained enhanced significance in terms of safeguarding the security of British interests on the sub-continent. Sindh was one of those territories that found itself catapulted centre-stage from the point of view of British strategic concerns, and it is in this context that McMurado’s largely overlooked but very illuminating account of Sindh needs to be placed” (p.vii).

Del Hoste’s Observation on Sindh

The book was edited by Ali and published by the Institute of Sindhology, Jamshoro. The editor has given very brief introduction of the book and motivation of its composing in his foreword. The writer, Lieutenant Edward Paterson Del Hoste, was a British surveyor who prepared his detailed report about Sindh which was then ruled by the Talpur dynasty. The American historian Cook (2008) has given detailed background of the motivation of Del Hoste’s mission in following words:

“Initially, Britain’s anti-Russian free trade policy along the Indus was not successful under the ruse of transporting a gift to Ranjit Singh (i.e. ruler of the Punjab). The company dispatched lieutenant Alexander Burnes to Sindh. His mission was to survey sumptuously the Indus and its tributaries. Despite diplomatic overtures, Sindh’s rulers (i.e. the Talpurs) rejected the Burnes’ use of the Indus for journeying to the Punjab. After the company

noted how such an action might negatively impact Sindh's relationship with Ranjit Singh, the Talpurs allowed Burnes to progress up the Indus represented the river as a good commercial route. It was particularly well received by Governor General William Bentick, who intruded John Fitz Gibbon (i.e. the Earl of Clare and Governor of Bombay) to dispatch a second mission included lieutenant Edward Paterson Del Hoste as a surveyor and draftsmen. Del Hoste later compiled his observations while in Sindh and submitted it as two reports to the Bombay Government" (p.ix).

Ali (1987) extolled Del Hoste for his intellectual Endeavour in the following words:

"Del Hoste deserves credit for he gathered this information under very unfavourable circumstances. As an Englishman he was suspected by the government and the people. Nobody was ready to provide him information which could be detrimental to the country. He was also careful not to adopt such methods which would create any suspicion. He collected all information secretly and quietly and frankly admitted that he could not have accurate knowledge about certain things. Del Hoste's observations on Sindh will prove valuable information to the scholars and students of Sindhology" (p.9).

A Social and Cultural History of Sindh

The book is compilation by Ali, which is based on Western narratives, travel accounts, and official correspondences about Sindh. Ali (2015) quoted excerpts directly from the writings of the books, and described the aim of the work as follows:

"In this volume an attempt is made to construct a social and cultural history of Sindh from 17th to 19th centuries. Except a few, majority of them visited Sindh during the Talpur period... The book thus presents the social and cultural life of Sindh up to the British conquest. The excerpts from the accounts and observations of the travellers are selected chronologically with care to avoid repetition" (p.ix).

Postcolonial Theory and English Writings Produced During the Colonial Period

Ali unequivocally praised the Western writers who have brought the people in their history for the first time. However, he seems to

have remained oblivious of the postcolonial theory as presented by Said (1978), which emphasizes the conscious and analytical re-reading of colonial era texts because western writings and presentation of the Eastern nations produced during colonial era must be read carefully, as they are replete with stereotypes and biases against the colonized nations like: “Orientals are inveterate liars, they are lethargic and suspicious,” and in everything oppose the clarity, direction, and nobility of Anglo-Saxon race” (p.38-39).

CONCLUSION

With regard to the Persian historiographies, Ali’s observations are very insightful, albeit terse and lacking in a comprehensive reading. His underlying polemical assumptions and lack of actual evidence to substantiate such prejudices are often a substantive barrier in interpreting his work. Ali is a distinguished historian with direct access to the original Persian sources, and he could undertake detailed critical analyses of the books under his study. Instead, he has chosen to write short, populist articles about these volumes. However, to his credit he has produced three important sources of the history of British-era Sindh. Besides his compilations, *A Social and Cultural History of Sindh* is wonderful academic endeavour, entirely to his credit. However, Ali should have taken postcolonial criticism into account in his analysis, particularly in order to contextualize books by British authors who represented a paradigm of colonial domination, and not an idyllic and benign pontification of the lives of ordinarily folk in Sindh.

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