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Article

Shifting Sands of Time: Aurangzeb's Portrayal in Urdu Historiography

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Abstract:

The primary objective of this paper is to meticulously analyse the representation of Aurangzeb within the context of Urdu historiography. In order to achieve this objective, it is crucial to have a comprehensive understanding of the intricate development of Urdu historiography, which may be observed through the lens of three major phases. This historical inquiry follows a chronological trajectory, beginning with the turbulent events of the Indian Rebellion of 1857 and extending its narrative to encompass subsequent developments up to the present day. Over an extended period, the field of Urdu historiography experienced significant transformations, which were caused by a multitude of political and social upheavals. These transformative factors have had a lasting impact on the fundamental characteristics and core of Urdu historiographical literature. As a result, the changes in the historical terrain had an inevitable impact on the representation and portrayal of Aurangzeb in Urdu literature. The primary objective of the paper is to analyse the transformative shifts that occurred in the portrayal of the Mughal emperor Aurangzeb within the context of Urdu historiography as it progressed through several historical periods.

Keywords: Aurangzeb, Mughal, Urdu Historiography, Urdu Literature, Indian History, Medieval Period

1. INTRODUCTION

Aurangzeb, the sixth ruler of the Mughal Empire, held the throne for a considerable span of around five decades. His reign was characterised by the pursuit of territorial expansion and the zenith of Mughal authority. Undoubtedly, his reign epitomises the pinnacle of the Mughal Empire's territorial expansion and cultural accomplishments.[1] Since his demise in 1707, an interval of more than three centuries passed, affording ample opportunity for different historians to extensively examine his life and rule. The huge amount of historical literature generated during this period has greatly influenced our understanding of Aurangzeb. These writings, which have been shaped by a variety of perspectives and historical circumstances, have played a significant role in enhancing our understanding of his rule, personality, and influence on the history of India. Historians frequently employ diverse analytical frameworks to examine his reign, which are shaped by their respective ideologies, cultural contexts, and availability of diverse historical sources. Consequently, the depictions of Aurangzeb in historical narratives can vary, encompassing perspectives that present him as a competent leader and devout follower of Islam, as well as a controversial figure associated with his policies against non-Muslims and the ensuing decline of the empire.

Starting with the British, they were the first to interpret and shape Indian historiography.[2] At the outset of their

1 Audrey Truschke, "*Aurangzeb : The Life and Legacy of India's Most Controversial King*" (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press Stanford, California, 2017), p. 3.

2 Gyanendra Pandey, *The Construction of Communalism in Colonial North India*, Third Edit, Oxford University Press, New Delhi,

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involvement with India, the British showed a primary inclination to explore the historical aspects of the country, with the aim of acquiring a better understanding of its past as well as its systems of administration and governance. Their early historical writings were intended to understand the complexity of Indian society and governance for administrative and scholarly purposes.[3] Nevertheless, a notable transformation occurred with the establishment of British imperial control in India. Upon assuming the position of ruling authority, their perspective on Indian history underwent a transformation. The British engaged in a deliberate quest to modify historical narratives in a manner that would advance their own interests. The British strategically employed history as a means to rationalise and validate their imperial control over India. This change in attitude was distinguished by the deliberate interpretation of historical events in a manner that aligned with the narrative of British ascendancy and provided intrinsic validation for their governance in India.[4] The utilisation of historical tales was employed to assert cultural, sociological, and administrative superiority, frequently depicting themselves as agents of order and progress among a purportedly disordered and antiquated Indian society. This manipulation of historical narratives served to reinforce and legitimise their authority, hence supporting the belief that British rule in India was a catalyst for societal progress.

Colonial Historians were drawn to the medieval era as it offered a wide range of historical events and allowed them the opportunity to interpret and shape historical facts to align with their narrative. They depicted the medieval period, spanning around 800 years, as an era of oppressive Muslim rule.[5] This portrayal exhibited a biased and oversimplified perspective, depicting Muslims as authoritarian rulers. In this particular context, Aurangzeb emerged as an iconic figure, symbolising the colonial historian's interpretation of a Muslim monarch.[6] They portrayed Aurangzeb as the epitome of a Muslim ruler, emphasising his practices and attributing certain acts against other communities to his faith and religious commitment.[7] Aurangzeb's seemingly routine actions were depicted as manifestations of his profound religious devotion. Meanwhile, his interactions with various communities and his policies concerning them were depicted as rooted in his supposed animosity or bigotry towards those communities. This portrayal, which exhibited a clear prejudice, effectively aligned with the colonial purpose by reinforcing the perception of Aurangzeb as a representative of Muslim intolerance and despotic rule. The portrayal employed by colonial historians had the purpose of not only denigrating Muslim rule in India but also of contrasting it with the perceived merits of British administration. This allowed them to legitimise their presence as a more enlightened and humanitarian authority in the region.

Notwithstanding Urdu's growing popularity as a language of poetry among the Indian population during the 17th and 18th centuries, the formal development of Urdu historiography, the writing of history in the Urdu language, emerged rather later, predominantly in the 19th century.[8] Urdu witnessed the emergence of significant historical works around the mid-19th century. Nevertheless, it is evident that colonial historians held a significant advantage over their Urdu counterparts in terms of the production and circulation of historical literature. Their works had been in circulation for almost a century before significant historical writings started emerging in Urdu. The existence of a chronological vacuum in the development of historical narratives resulted in the consolidation of interpretations, prejudices, and narratives put forth by colonial historians into the prevailing historical discourse in India. During the zenith of Urdu historiography, when notable historical works were being produced in Urdu language, Indian society was deeply influenced by the pervasive dominance of colonial discourses. The colonial narratives, ideologies, and interpretations exerted a substantial impact on multiple aspects of Indian civilisation, encompassing the production and interpretation of historical narratives in the Urdu language.

Aurangzeb, who was the subject of criticism and negative depictions by colonial historians, became the focal point for Urdu scholars to counter and revisit these assertions. Scholars proficient in the Urdu language assumed the responsibility of examining and reevaluating the claims made during the colonial era against Aurangzeb. The aim of their study was to provide a more comprehensive and nuanced perspective of Aurangzeb's governance. They scrutinised and questioned the negative portrayals, seeking to provide a more accurate representation of his policies, actions, and the broader context of his reign. Urdu historians initiated a comprehensive analysis of historical sources and critically reassessed multiple facets of Aurangzeb's reign. They conducted a thorough examination of the colonial accusations and prejudices, with the aim of offering a more in-depth portrayal of Aurangzeb's rule. Their efforts aimed to counter the one-sided narrative produced by colonial historians, revealing the complexities and multifaceted nature of Aurangzeb's reign. However, this reinterpretation

2006, p. 23.

3 Sinharaja Tammita Delgoda, "'Nabob Historian and Orientalist.' Robert Orme: The Life and Career of an East India Company Servant (1728-1801)," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 1992, https://doi.org/10.1017/S135618630000300X, p. 371.

4 Ehrlich, "*The East India Company and the Politics of Knowledge*", p.165

5 Tod and Crooke, *Annals and Antiquities of Rajasthan: Or The Central and Western Rajput States of India,* p. 09.

6 M A Syed, *Muslim Response to the West: Muslim Historiography in India, 1857-1914*, Historical Studies (National Institute of Historical and Cultural Research, 1988), p. 23.

7 W. H. Sleeman, *Rambles and Recollections of an Indian Official*, Constable's Oriental Miscellany of Original & Selected Publications (J. Hatchard and son, 1844), vol. 2, p. 355.

8 *Literary Cultures in History: Reconstructions from South Asia*, ed. Sheldon Pollock, p. 881.

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within Urdu historiography is categorised into three distinct phases, each reflecting a different approach or emphasis in the depiction of Aurangzeb.

1.1. 1st Phase

The initial phase commences with "*Tarikh I Hind*" penned by Munshi Sada Sukh Lal, and it was published in 1856, just one year prior to the significant Indian Rebellion of 1857, and extends up to the publication of "*Takht o Taj I Hind*" in 1903. During this phase, the influence of colonial historiography is conspicuous in how Aurangzeb is portrayed within these Urdu accounts. The writings from this phase largely mirrored the negative portrayal of Aurangzeb prevalent in colonial narratives. Historians, while producing works in Urdu, adopted and reiterated the same biases and allegations against Aurangzeb as propagated by colonial historians. This colonial representation framed Aurangzeb as someone harbouring animosity towards the Hindu community, implementing biased policies, and forcefully imposing Islam. Some historians even directly used colonial sources, indicating a clear influence and reliance on the perspectives and content offered by the colonial historiography.

Sada Sukh Lal quoted a famous remark of Robert Orme[9], that has been used by several colonial historians to tarnish the image of Aurangzeb.

> *"In order to palliate to his Mahomedan subjects the crimes by which he had become their sovereign, he determined to enforce the conversion of the Hindus throughout his empire by the severest penalties and even threatened the sword, as if the blood of his subjects were to wash away the stains, with which he was imbrued by the blood of his family."*[10]

This implies that Aurangzeb sought to use the conversion of Hindus to Islam as a way to somehow redeem himself from the alleged moral impurities arising from his rise to power. Aurangzeb deliberately chose a forceful and coercive approach to ensure the conversion of Hindus throughout his empire. He employed severe penalties and even threatened the use of the sword as a means to compel the conversion of Hindus to Islam.

Additionally, the sentiments expressed by another contemporary historian, Maulvi Kareemuddin, reinforce the claim that Aurangzeb's policies of forced religious conversions targeting Hindus not only faced significant opposition but also led to uprisings among various factions, including the Marathas and other communities.[11]

He wrote that:

> *"The implementation of Aurangzeb's forcible religious conversion policies targeting Hindus resulted in substantial opposition and uprisings among various factions, including the Marathas and other communities. The adoption of this policy not only generated resistance but also played a role in the gradual decline of the Mughal Empire's power and stability."*[12]

However, it's worth noting that towards the close of the century, Urdu historians of Aurangzeb began to critically evaluate and question the colonial narrative, signalling a departure from earlier interpretations. This shift represents a growing awareness among these historians as they embarked on a path of more critical and nuanced historical analysis.

1.2. 2nd Phase

This transformation was most pronounced with the publication of Maulvi Ahmaduddin's "*Aurangzeb*" in 1905. Maulvi Ahmaduddin adopted a revolutionary approach by unequivocally dismissing the use of colonial sources and travellers' accounts. His rationale behind this was to eliminate any potential influence stemming from the colonial interpretation of history. Instead, he took the bold step of constructing the history of Aurangzeb almost exclusively based on Persian sources.[13] His work set a new standard for historical research on this subject.

Following in the footsteps of Maulvi Ahmaduddin, Allama Shibli Nomani further advanced this trend. He made significant intervention primarily through his work "*Mazamin I Alamgiri*" or "*Aurangzeb Alamgir par ek Nazar*," published in 1911. His work was instrumental in challenging and refuting the claims and representations put forward by colonial historians about Aurangzeb. He accused these colonial historians of distorting facts, making broad and sweeping generalizations from insignificant incidents, misinterpreting historical events, and skilfully manipulating factual information to suit their narratives.[14] Shibli Nomani specifically delved into several allegations made by colonial historians regarding Aurangzeb. These included the imprisonment of his father, the killing of his brothers, the alleged mistreatment of Hindus, and the disruption of harmonious relations between the Mughals and the Rajputs. He scrutinized and reevaluated these charges, aiming to provide a more accurate representation

9 Sada Sukh Lal, *Tarikh i Hind*, Matba' Nurul Absar, Agra, 1856, p. 90

10 Robert Orme, *Historical Fragments of the Mogul Empire, of the Morattoes, and of the English Concerns in Indostan: From the Year MDCLIX. Origin of the English Establishment, and of the Company's Trade, at Broach and Surat; and a General Idea of the Government and Peopl* (F. Wingrave, 1805), p. 73.

11 The contemporary historians hold a consensus that the revolts and uprisings against Aurangzeb were not exclusively instigated by one specific community at a single moment. Instead, these rebellions were more complex and multifaceted, involving a diverse range of communities. These uprisings encompassed various groups and were not solely limited to members of the Hindu community.

12 Maulvi Kareemuddin, *Tarikh i Hind*, Nawal Kishore Press, Lucknow, 1872, p. 148.

13 Maulvi Ahmaduddin, *Aurangzeb*, Al ta'alim Steam Press, Lahore, 1905, p. 1 – 4.

14 Allama Shibli Nomani, Aurangzeb Alamgir par ek Nazar, Darul Musannifeen, Azamgarh, 2012, p. 30.

of historical events during Aurangzeb's reign.[15] Moreover, Shibli Nomani made a significant contribution by attempting to compile a list of Hindu nobility within Aurangzeb's court. This effort, undertaken almost fifty years prior to Athar Ali's renowned work "The Mughal nobility under Aurangzeb" published in 1968, was pioneering in identifying and acknowledging the presence and roles of Hindu nobles within Aurangzeb's administration.[16] Shibli Nomani's attempt to document the Hindu nobility within Aurangzeb's court was a notable step in recognising the diverse composition and contributions of different communities within the Mughal administration. Shibli Nomani's work not only aimed to challenge the biased and distorted narratives propagated by colonial historians but also undertook the crucial task of highlighting the presence and roles of non-Muslim nobility within the Mughal court during Aurangzeb's era, contributing to a more nuanced and balanced understanding of the historical period.

Additionally, Najmul Ghani significantly contributed to this evolving trend by producing "*Tarikh i Rajgan i Hind*." This work is noteworthy for its critical examination of Tod's "*Annales and Antiquities of Rajasthan*."[17] This shift contributed to a richer and more diverse understanding of Aurangzeb's historical context. The practice of critiquing colonial historians for their portrayal of Aurangzeb in Indian historiography persisted up to the present times within Urdu historiography.

During the era of the noncooperation movement in India, a significant shift occurred as both the Hindu and Muslim communities began aligning with each other, fostering a sense of unity.[18] However, in opposition to this growing unity between Hindus and Muslims, certain scholars with communal interests, driven by divisive agendas, sought to disrupt this harmony. They purposefully used the character and historical legacy of Aurangzeb to incite discord between the two communities.[19] They selectively highlighted aspects of Aurangzeb's rule, particularly those that could create division and animosity between the Hindu and Muslim communities. By rekindling and emphasizing historical grievances or perceived injustices associated with Aurangzeb's reign, these communal scholars sought to exacerbate existing tensions or create new fault lines between Hindus and Muslims. Consequently, a new tradition began to gain prominence in Urdu historiography after the 1920s, focusing on Hindu-Muslim harmony or unity.

The historian in this period began to redefine the period of Aurangzeb in terms of religious harmony. They emphasised that during his reign people of different religions were settled and lived in harmony with each other. They were free from religious prejudices and were able to coexist peacefully. Moreover, they suggested that the people were so tolerant and accepting of each other's beliefs that the only way to distinguish their religion was by their clothing. Indicating the level of religious tolerance and integration within society during this time.[20]

This shift is exemplified by the work of Mehta Jaimini Ji, titled "*Aurangzeb ki Zindagi ka Rausan aur Asli Pehlu*." In his book, Mehta Ji emphasized the importance of younger generations dedicating their time to researching and uncovering the genuine history of ancient and medieval India. He argued that one of the primary ways to bridge the gap of mutual enmity and hatred between Hindus and Muslims was to present the true history of Muslim rulers who had ruled India for extended periods. Mehta Ji expressed his motivation for choosing Aurangzeb as a subject of study. He noted that there was significant misunderstanding and misinterpretation about Aurangzeb among both the Hindu and Muslim communities. Muslims, in his view, failed to delve into the real circumstances of Aurangzeb's life and did not make an effort to present his personal qualities and achievements to the public. On the other hand, among Hindus, prejudices against Aurangzeb had taken root.[21] Furthermore, Mehta Ji has argued that these misunderstandings had led to a prevailing negative perception of the Muslim Empire and that these misconceptions were perpetuated by English rule, fostering resentment. He believed that by presenting the true aspect of India's economic prosperity and development during Aurangzeb's era, people would come to appreciate the progress made by India and the Hindus in that period.[22] This approach, he hoped, would promote a more balanced and harmonious understanding of Indian history, fostering unity and cooperation between Hindus and Muslims.[23]

In a similar vein, two years later, Maulvi Samiullah Beg authored "*Hind Ahd e Aurangzeb Mein*." He specifically mentioned that his original intention was to write only the tenth chapter of this book, focusing on the perspective of Hindus and Muslims and the possibility of unity among them.[24] This work draws extensively from the account of Alexander Hamilton. Subsequently, in 1938, Muhammad Ayyub Khan Najeebabadi tackled this theme more directly

15 Javed Ali Khan, *Early Urdu Historiography* (Khuda Bakhsh Oriental Public Library, 2005), p. 259.

16 Khan, p. 264.

17 Najmul Ghani Khan Rampuri, *Tarikh i Rajgan i Hind*, Hamdam Barqi Press, Lucknow, 1927.

18 Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, *From Plassey to Partition and after: A History of Modern India* (Orient Blackswan Private Limited, 2016), p. 302.

19 Pandey, op. cit., p. 24.

20 Mirza Yar Jung Samiullah Beg, *Hind Ahd e Aurangzeb Mein*, Taj Press, Hyderabad, 1924, p. 8.

21 Mehta Jaimini Ji, *Aurangzeb ki Zindagi ka Rausan aur Asli Pehlu*, Vishv Sahitya Bhandar, Meerut, 1922, p. 7.

22 Ibid., p. 8.

23 Ibid., p. 64.

24 Samiullah Beg, op. cit., p. 1.

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with his book titled "*Alamgir Hinduon ki Nazar Mein*."[25] This book stands out as an outstanding account, with the author demonstrating remarkable diligence in collecting and compiling not only the historical accounts but also the viewpoints and opinions of Hindus, spanning from Aurangzeb's reign up to the time of the book's writing.

1.3. 3rd Phase

During the period from India's independence in 1947 up to the present times, there hasn't been any particularly noteworthy or groundbreaking work on the historical figure Aurangzeb by Urdu historians. In other words, the Urdu historians in this period haven't significantly contributed to a fresh understanding or interpretation of Aurangzeb. Instead, their writings seem to draw heavily from the opinions, perspectives, and historical analyses presented in Urdu histories that existed before India's independence. The new works in Urdu on Aurangzeb during this phase either incorporate the viewpoints and conclusions found in the earlier Urdu histories or, in some cases, build their entire narrative on the foundation of the pre-independence writings about Aurangzeb.

However, a notable work was produced by Dr. Abdullah Chughtai entitled "*Fanoon i Latifa ba Ahd i Aurangzeb*". This work is a study of Aurangzeb's contributions to art and architecture in India. Significantly, it challenges the commonly held belief that the onset of Aurangzeb's reign marked a decline in these aspects. Abdullah Chughtai's work contends that Aurangzeb possessed a comparable understanding of art and architecture as his predecessor Shah Jahan.[26] Chughtai supports this assertion by referencing a letter written by Aurangzeb to Shah Jahan during a visit to the construction site of the Taj Mahal. In the letter, Aurangzeb reportedly suggested various improvements and alterations to the construction process. Chughtai argues that this correspondence provides valuable insights into Aurangzeb's architectural sensibilities.[27] Moreover, Chughtai draws attention to the Taj Mahal's mausoleum, specifically the accommodation of Shah Jahan's grave, built later during the eighth year of Aurangzeb's reign. He highlights the seamless integration of Shah Jahan's grave into the Taj Mahal, executed so masterfully that the two graves, despite a three-decade difference in construction, appear indistinguishable to observers.[28] This observation underscores Chughtai's claim regarding Aurangzeb's continued appreciation for and contribution to Mughal architecture. In addition to the Taj Mahal, Dr. Chughtai's work reportedly catalogues both well-known and lesser-known monuments, detailing their features to illustrate the architectural advancements during Aurangzeb's era. This comprehensive approach contributes to a nuanced understanding of the architectural landscape of the period, challenging the prevailing notion of a decline in artistic and architectural endeavours during Aurangzeb's reign.

Building on the works of Samiullah Beg and Ayyub Khan Najeebabadi, Khursheed Mustafa Rizvi expanded upon this work and incorporated the opinions of Hindu writers up to 1996. This comprehensive compilation was published as "*Tarikh ki Sacchaiyan Aurangzeb aur Tipu Sultan*."[29] The book serves as a valuable resource for understanding the perspectives and views of both Hindus and Muslims regarding Aurangzeb and Tipu Sultan, spanning over several centuries.

During this time, a significant development occurred in the world of Urdu literature when two important works on Aurangzeb were translated into the Urdu language. The first of these works was "*Aurangzeb ek Naya Zawiya i Nazar*" by Om Prakash Prasad[30], and the second was "*Aurangzeb aur Hindu'on k sath Taaluqat*" by Akhilesh Jaiswal[31]. Both of these works were published by the Khuda Baksh Oriental Library, Patna. These translations had a profound influence on how Aurangzeb was portrayed in Urdu literature. They brought new perspectives and insights into the Urdu representation of Aurangzeb, enriching the discourse surrounding this historical figure. The translation of these works marked a significant contribution to the ongoing discussion and understanding of Aurangzeb in Urdu literature.

In the year 2000, Akbar Rehmani introduced his work titled "*Aurangzeb ki Dastaan I Maashiqa – Haqiqat ya Afsana*." This book essentially serves as a critical evaluation of N. S. Inamdar's Marathi novel, "Shahenshah," which had been recently translated into English. Rehmani's work primarily centers around the intriguing event of Aurangzeb's love affair with Heerabi Zainabadi.[32] In this critical assessment, he takes a fresh look at the entire narrative, scrutinising it from various angles. Furthermore, Rehmani endeavours to analyse the viewpoints of other Urdu historians regarding this particular event. Notable figures in this regard include Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, Syed Sabahuddin Abdur Rehman, and Syed Najeeb Ashraf. This scholarly endeavour contributes to a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the complex historical and literary portrayal of Aurangzeb's love life in Urdu literature.

2. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Urdu historiography on Aurangzeb is characterised by its responsive nature, focusing on addressing criticisms and presenting justifications for

25 Muhammad Ayyub Khan Najeebabadi, *Alamgir Hinduon ki Nazar Mein*, Madina Press, Bijnor, 1938.

26 Dr. Abdullah Chughtai, *Fanoon i Latifa ba Ahd i Aurangzeb*, Kutubkhana Nauras, Lahore, 1957, p. 14.

27 Ibid., p. 41 – 42.

28 Ibid., p. 22.

29 Khursheed Mustafa Rizvi, *Tarikh ki Sacchaiyan Aurangzeb aur Tipu Sultan*, Markazi Printers, Delhi, 1996.

30 Om Prakash Prasad, *Aurangzeb ek Naya Zawiya i Nazar*, Khuda Baksh Oriental Library, Patna, 1994.

31 Akhilesh Jaiswal, *Aurangzeb aur Hindu'on k sath Taaluqat*, Khuda Baksh Oriental Library, Patna, 1996.

32 Prof. Akbar Rehmani, *Aurangzeb ki Dastaan I Maashiqa – Haqiqat ya Afsana*, Educational Academy, Jalgaon (MH), 2000, p. 6.

his actions, particularly in response to interpretations by different groups of historians. Urdu historians were not merely chronicling events but were actively engaged in a form of intellectual defence or advocacy for Aurangzeb. They selectively focused on issues and facts that were wielded as weapons against Aurangzeb's credibility. These issues include the war of succession, policies against his brothers, the imprisonment of his father, treatment of Hindus in his states, campaigns against Marathas, and his Rajput policy.

Despite a shift in the trend of political history writing after independence, Urdu historians continue to adhere to their traditional approach, which was marked by a defensive stance. Akbar Rehmani's writing about Aurangzeb's love affairs with Zainabadi Begum in the early 2000s further illustrates the defensive nature of Urdu historiography. Even when delving into a more personal aspect of Aurangzeb's life, this exploration is framed as a response to the portrayal of these events in the Shahenshah Novel. The motivation for addressing Aurangzeb's personal life, which might be considered beyond the scope of traditional historiography, is still rooted in a defensive posture.

DECLARATIONS

Author(s) Contribution

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