

Re-assessing the military career of Bakhtiyar Khilji in Bihar: Tabaqat-i-Nasiri and the Inscriptions of Bihar and Bengal

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Abstract: The term 'research' refers to the academic investigation into some 'research question' that needs solution- an answer which is 'truth' or new knowledge. In historical research this task posits a great challenge for the researcher because the sources which are utilised for this purpose need to be evaluated first for their degree of accuracy as far as the human faculties can allow a recorder of the events to stay just and neutral to the events that he/she is recording. A literary source, that is why, can never be taken solely on its own merit: archaeological corroboration, or corroboration of the fact in another literary works, as far as possible, is required to arrive at the 'new knowledge'.

Minhaj us Siraj remains the primary source for the history of foundation of Muslim rule in Bengal, which included the areas that were under the state of Magadh earlier. Following his account, Tabaqat - i- Nasiri, the modern historians writing on this period have unwittingly adopted his story as the main version of history for this period. Minhaj has covered Bakhtiyar Khilji's attacks and plundering raids in the region of Bihar in his account and has vividly described the burning of esteemed Nalanda University founded by the first Pala ruler Gopala I.

The present study seeks to put forward some of the less cited inscriptions which enable a fresh view of the history of Bihar in the late twelfth and early thirteenth century

Key-words: Bakhtiyar Khilji, Early medieval Bihar, Delhi Sultanate, Nalanda.

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I. INTRODUCTION

The establishment of Turkish rule in India is very well documented in the Indian textbooks, modern research and in the 'History' of India. This history has been primarily reconstructed on the strength of the contemporary Persian chronicles written in the Sultanate by trusted clerics who accompanied Turks from Central Asia, writing in thirteenth century: Minhaj- us -Siraj (Tabaat-i Nasiri), Ferishta and Isami (Futuh-i-Salatin) - to name a few. These esteemed historians inform us that the worldview that pushed the Turkish invaders from Central Asian lands towards India in the last quarter of twelfth century involved the greater Islamic aspiration to bring the entire world under the Islamic umbrella through relentless political and territorial expansion. A variety of other sources and their analysis by modern historians writing on the concerned period, however, have established that the underlying reason behind this push was, primarily, the urgent need of economic sustenance of their the Turks at their home turf. In case of Indian conquest, plundering was one of the easiest ways for them to collect wealth from the rich Hindu temples which could sustain them back in Ghazni and later on help them to carve out empires in unexplored lands.

Muizudin Mohammad of Ghur invaded the Chauhan bastion of Delhi and Ajmer in the last decade of twelfth century where the two battles of Tarain were fought between the Turkish army and the army of the Rajput Confederacy under the leadership of Prithviraja Chauhan. In the first battle the Turkish forces were routed, but Muizuddin succeeded in defeating the valiant and powerful army of Prithviraja Chauhan in the second battle of Tarain, due to superior technology and better war management. Around the same time Bakhtiyar Khilji, a Turkish slave without an employ entered Indian territories and proceeded towards Bihar and Bengal provinces to try his luck in military leadership and to spread the Islamic faith and might in far off regions of India.

The present study seeks to put forward some of the less cited inscriptions which enable a fresh view of the history of Bihar in the late twelfth and early thirteenth century- the period that witnessed the military advances of Bhaktiyar Khilji in the region. The contemporary historian Minhaj us Siraj praises him as a man of 'impetus, enterprising, intrepid, bold, sagacious and expert in warfare.'

II. MATERIAL AND METHODS

This study is based on the details provided by the following some of the available Sanskrit inscriptions. These are as follows:

- The Arma Pillar Inscription of Madanpala, (1157AD)
- The Bihar Hill Image Inscription of Madanpala (3rd regnal year of Madanpala, middle of twelfth century)
- The Sone-East Bank Copper Plate Inscription (1197 AD)
- Rohtasgarh Rock Inscription(1223 AD)
- The Maner Copperplate Inscription of Govinda Chandra (JASB, Vol.V. ,1922, pp.81-84) 1126, Niyogi, R., The history of the Gahadavala dynasty p. 25, no. 25.)

Apart from these there are certain texts which fill in the gaps to make a coherent picture of the times. B.P. Sinha's 'The decline of the Kingdom of Magadh' is based on the inscriptional and textual corroboration of various facts pertaining to our subject of study.

III. DESCRIPTION AND DISCUSSION

Ikhtiyar ad-Din Muhammad bin Bakhtiyar Khilji, another Turkish slave from Afghanistan who came to India in search of a military opportunity, was an ordinary tribesman. He was first denied service in the Ghurid forces because of his slim stature and later in Delhi when Aibak became the political head of the Delhi Sultanate, due to similar reasons. Bakhtiyar Khilji proceeded towards Magadh (Bihar) and Bengal to prove his worth.

Thereupon he took service under the Iqtadar or Governor of Badaun, who had an extensive charge in modern west UP. Soon after, he repaired to the service of the commander of Awadh, who assigned him two villages on the boundary of Bihar. This gave him the opportunity of making plundering raids into Bihar and Maner, which following the downfall of the Gahadavala empire had become a kind of a no-man's land dominated by petty Gahadavala chiefs. Finally he got patronage by ...of Kannoji who granted him appointment in Mirzapur. About eleven miles due east of Chunar and some thirty miles from Mirzapur the village of Bhuli, overhung by a fort in ruins at the northern foot of the Vindhya range, now marks the cradle of Muhammad Bakhtiyar's power and ambition .. After having supplanted the petty Gahadavala chiefs of this tract, he began ravaging the open country to the east of the Karmanasa and in the direction of Muner and Bihar. His fame as a doughty Lord Marcher and successful general soon attracted to his standard large bodies of Khiljis and Turks wandering about in Hindustan in search of bread and a new home. Rai Lakshman Sena, the ruler of Bengal, who had been a rival of the Gahadavalas, preferred to confine himself to Bengal, either because he was too old and feeble or because he was under the illusion that the Turks would be satisfied with Bihar if he did not come into conflict with them.

Bakhtiyar Khalji's reputation as an enterprising warrior spread far and wide, and many Khaljis from different parts of Hindustan joined him. Even Muizzuddin sent him a special robe of distinction (Khilat) and honored him, though he was neither his slave nor his employee. Emboldened, Bakhtiyar Khalji now attacked a fort in Bihar with two hundred horsemen, which he later found was a Buddhist monastery (Vihar). This apparently was the famous university of Nalanda. He then captured Vikramshila, another university town and wrought much havoc there. He also captured the capital Uddandapur and built a fort there. This is placed in 1202.

There appears to be several missing aspects in the existing presentation of political scenario in the region. The Muslim chroniclers have focussed mainly on the expansion of their own Islamic world in an alien land which their patrons wished to subjugate. Actually they could not have any access to other types of sources for the construction of history other than their own people, nor would they have had any inclination to search for such diverse sources of information, being the conquerors of a 'kafir' land.

“The other side”

The study of various inscriptions of the period, the research work done so far by the modern scholars in the geographical locations of the area where Bakhtiyar Khilji operated and the specific dynasties that exerted their control in Magadh and Bihar after the decline of Later Guptas helps us to get a more graphic understanding of Bakhtiyar Khilji's military campaigns in Bihar in real terms.

After the fall of the later Guptas in the wake of military campaigns of Lalitaditya's and Yashodharman of Malwa, Magadh disintegrated into small provinces. The rise of Palas of Bengal and Bihar under the elected king Gopala I led to revival of central authority in the region. Palas patronised Mahayana Buddhism. Gopala's patronage to Buddhism led to the construction of the Nalanda Vihar near Pataliputra which became a home for the studies in Mahayana Buddhism. (Taranath, IA. IV. P.366) He also constructed the Vikramshila University near Bhagalpur and Oddandapuri Vihara in the Biharsharif region in Magadh. After Senas' ascendance in Bengal, Palas were ousted from Bengal, but continued to rule in some part of Bihar; (Sinha, pp.446-48) there

were other dynasties as well.- Harishchandra, son of Jayachandra of Kauauj maintained his independence till at least 1100 A.D.; - a feudatory of that house, Ranaka Vijayakarna, erected a votive stone-pillar at Belkhara within 8 kos of Chunar in 1197 A.D (Sahai, p.161); the Mahanayakas of the famous fort of Rohtas maintained their independence and one of their sub-vassals, Mahamandalika Udayaraja of Navanerapattana granted some villages to a Brahmin family in 1197 in the neighbourhood of Dehri-on-Son. Mithila remained out of bound for Bakhtiyar Khilji. 'As the eastward expansion of the Muslim power through North Bihar was at this time barred by the powerful Hindu kingdom of Mithila under the Karnata dynasty the momentum of the Muslim offensive under the leadership of Muhammad Bakhtyar acquired a greater driving force in South Bihar'. The Karnata Dynasty of South India had remained in Mithila in Bihar even after the end of the so called 'Tripartite struggle' among the Palas, Rashtrakutas and Gahadawalas for claiming the political and military supremacy in India.

The point that is being made here is that even when there was no powerful central authority in the region, most of the feudatories of previous dynasties continued to engage in their activities and did not seem to be affected by the impending raids of Bakhtiyar Khilji. The Turkish troopers popularly mentioned as 'Turukshas' who levied some type of tax on the ordinary people and traders crossing the rivers, has been recorded to have started as early as 1126. (The Maner Copperplate Inscription) The Sone-East Bank Copper Plate Inscription discovered in the river bed near the east bank of the river Sone in the district of Aurangabad. (EJ, Vol, XXII, pp. 222-30. Sahai, p.144) reveals that the inscription refers itself to the reign of the king Indradhavalala (the son of Sahasadhavalala and the grandson of Pratapadbavalala) and records the grant of the village of GambhSri by the Mahamandalika Udayaraja of the Kadamba dynasty jointly with the overlord (the king Indradhavalala) to the Brahmanas, Dharesvara and Mahaditya, in the proportion of three to two. The document was caused to be written by the Thakkura Sri Sujana. The genealogy traced in this inscription claims that the Dhavalala dynasty was founded by Khadirapala, Pratapadbaraja being the third in descent was a feudatory of the Gahadavalala king Vijayachandra of Kanauj and he was the first important member of the dynasty.

The Rohtasgadb Rock Inscription of King (Ksitindra) Pratapa further proves the point. The inscription is inscribed in four lines on the rock of the hill near Lai Darwaza (Red Gate) of the Rohtasgarh in the district of Rohtas. The language of the inscription is Sanskrit. The inscription refers itself to the king Sri Pratapa who, according to Kielhorn, was a scion or successor of the Mahanayaka Pratapadhavalala of Japila of the Khadirapala dynasty. In the inscription Sri Pratapa claims to have routed the Yavanas. It also records the excavation of a well or tank by one Madhava in the time of the king. The Yavana with whom Sri Pratapa is said to have fought may have been the army of Muhammad, the son of Bakht-i-yar who, according to the Tabaqat-i-Nasiri, received the fiefs of Bhagavat and Bhlull, situated between the Gafiga and the Karmanasa in about 1199 A.D. This inscription proves that this dynasty resisted the Muslim army for at least twenty-seven years. The inscription is dated 1223 A.D. (El, vol, IV, pp. 310-12; Niyogi, R., The History of the Gahadavalala Dynasty, pp. 118-19)

IV. CONCLUSION

Bakhtiyar Khilji achieved a lot of military success in Bihar and Bengal in a very short time. He augmented the foundation of Muslim rule in India by strengthening the Delhi Sultanate in a time when it was much needed for the Islamic Sultanate's survival in a predominantly Hindu dominions. However, he was not able to establish his absolute political control over Bihar, as indicated by Minhaj's Tabaqat, where he remained only a 'Turuksha plunderer'.

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