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Baburnama: Negotiating Autobiography and Historicity

Dr. Aateka Khan
Assistant Professor (Department of English)
Bharati College, University of Delhi

Abstract

This article explores the Baburnama as an exceptional autobiography written by the first of the Mughal emperors. Babur's account sketches his career, which began with multiple political upsets that nevertheless had no effect on his indomitable spirit. Despite early losses Babur who was driven out of his homeland, sought and received validation in the Indian subcontinent. The Baburnama is a life writing, which exhibits an extraordinary lack of self-regard and valorization with a concomitant historicity whose fidelity to truth which is hard to question. It also reveals the poetic accomplishments of a ruler who, despite being embroiled in many military campaigns, was prolific in poetic outpourings. This paper presents the multi-faceted character of the text, whose historical and literary significance exceeds generic expectations.

Keywords: *Baburnama, Autobiography, Multi-faceted Character*

Introduction

The *Baburnama*, is a unique book, written by the founder of the Mughal Empire. Like all autobiographical acts of narration, it stands by itself, distinct, its protean character defying easy generalizations. This paper seeks to critically engage with the *Baburnama*, as an autobiographical text, a historical document, and a literary work.

The translation I have referred to is Annette Beveridge's, which by retaining words from the target text, gives the feeling of proximity to the original Turki text, and thus is not as alienating as Thackston's.

Zahiruddin Muhammad Babur (1483-1530) was the direct descendant of the two great conquerors of Central Asia, Timur (d 1405) and Chengiz khan (d 1227). Babur's father, Umar Shaikh and his Chaghtai Mughul mother, both contributed to Babur's redoubtable character. Owing to the practice of patrilineage, Babur self-consciously, identified himself as a Timurid, even though today he is ironically known as a Mughul. Yet such doubly lofty lineage proved to be no guarantee of kingship, there being dozens of Mirzas and Amirs to contend with. These heirs to Chengiz Khan and Timur respectively, fought each other to expand the little territory left to them. Babur, when only 12 years old, inherited the patrimony of Andijan, the capital of Farghana. Newly initiated into the business of kingship, already at the age of 13, he seized Samarqand from the Chenghized Uzbek leader, Shaibani Khan, but barely managed to rule for over 100 days. For Babur, Samarqand was special, as he considered it his imperial inheritance, and also because for him, it signified the epitome of civilization. Twice over, Babur was to besiege, conquer and lose Samarqand until finally having lost Andijan, with nothing left but a handful of retainers, he fled to the south of Afghanistan and in 1504 occupied Kabul. From Kabul, he launched a series of attacks and expeditions into Hindustan.

The *Baburnama*is a monumental record of all these happenings and much more. According to Thackston who appears to unproblematically consider the *Baburnama*as an autobiography, "the autobiography as we know it was unheard of when Babur decided to keep a written record of his life (9)." The tradition that Babur had before him was that of the royal memoir, as Annette Susannah Beveridge also avers, the suffix '*nama,'* meaning history. Much earlier, of course, the Shahnama by Firdausi, for instance, was the legendary record of kings. The *nama* gradually came to denote and

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represent factual histories rather than being quasi-mythological stories. While the Zafarnama (History of the victorious) was a court chronicle of Timur's life Babur was more likely to be influenced by Timur's own Turki Malfuzat (annals). This tradition of authorship was kept alive by Timur'ssons and grandsons.

The *Baburnama,* however, is not merely the historical documentation of a conqueror's life. Neither is it strictly speaking, an autobiography. The text is an interface between life as it is lived and the historical record. The fact that the *Baburnama*is not a modern, self-conscious literary or psychological autobiography, tracing the process of coming into being of the self, does not render it less important. As James Olney expostulates, autobiography has no form or order, it is a life work which is written in the manner the spirit impels. The idea behind Olney's belief is that any work, in so far as it proceeds from a particular person, and is shaped by his or her own self, even though unawares, is in a sense self-portraiture. As Olney succinctly puts it "a man's lifework is his fullest autobiography and, he being what he is and where and when he is, neither the lifework nor the autobiography could be otherwise (3)."

What particularly makes the *Baburnama* peculiar is the fact that in part it is both a memoir and a diary. The memoir is more like a chronicle, relating the individual to history, but with little stress on the self and therefore it reflects the writer's attitudes and feeling indirectly. The diary unlike a memoir is not a retrospective account, but, as Philippe Lejeune elucidates, it is the record of "successive presents" which lead the way to a future that is unknown. It might also never be reread. Distinguishing autobiography from diary writing Philippe Lejeune explains that autobiographies announce closure. According to him an autobiographer initiates the process of narrativizing his life with the they already know the end. The diary, however stretches continuously into the future, at the time not lived will give further occasion for writing till the time death takes over(How do diaries End).

The memoir and diary aspects of the *Baburnama* meet at the common point of chronological order. Babur always dates his narrative, whether he writes it contemporaneously or whether he recounts past events. Towards the end of the Kabul section and throughout the Hindustan one, the narrative takes on the shape of a diary, with precise dates. This part of the narrative resembles a rough sketch, which requires extensive revision. Babur's diary is not the personal diary as we understand it today, it is rather a hybrid between the diary and the journal, leaning more towards the latter. Also interspersed between the diary entries are accounts of happenings outside of Babur's immediate environment, for instance Babur does not omit Humayun's battles in in the Hindustan section even though he is not present at the scene.

However protean the autobiographical mode may be, one of the defining features of all autobiographical writing is its fidelity to the truth. The truth value of a narrative is a very complex feature, and hard to define. All representations are necessarily interpretations of past events. The narrative that reconstructs the past, also reveals the self, as it is the involvement with the world and an act of speech which bears the imprint of the narrator. Since narrative functions as identity content, Paul John Eakin draws our attention to the disquieting proposition that "the regulation of narrative carries the possibility of the regulation of identity ("Breaking the Rules: The consequences of Self-Narrations,"112)." It is true, many modern autobiographies reveal the autobiographers deliberate attempt at re-presentation through the manipulation of facts or indeed through fiction, but Eakin here points to a more pertinent problem. Eakin perceptively argues that the very genre of autobiography is inherently problematic since it is impossible to determine the truthfulness of an autobiography, by depending solely on it. According to Eakin, it is next to impossible to determine if the identity which is encountered by the reader of an autobiography, actually squares with the author's life experiences narrated. He contends that the self that the autobiographer presents could

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possibly be a "signature" in other words a narrative identity that the reader has no way of ascertaining(Eakin, 278).

Despite such a cautious understanding of autobiographical writing "against any facile assumptions of the transparency of autobiographical writing as a record of the past (4)" as Sturrock puts it, in the Language of Autobiography, the *Baburnama*has, almost entirely been treated as fact. The reasons as I identify them, are numerous. First of all, the problem of 'truth-claims' has only recently become a pressing concern, and is confined to theorists who are largely interested in European, canonized texts. John Sturrock in The Language of Autobiography, unapologetically cherry picks canonical autobiographical texts pertaining to Western culture. Sturrock asserts the innate superiority of certain autobiographical narratives as responsible for their privileged status ruling out the ethnocentric basis of aesthetic appreciation (19)." The few commentators who have shown interest in the *Baburnama*, tend to unconsciously treat the text simplistically, neither questioning the credibility of the book, nor giving reasons for not doing so. William Erskine, the first translator of the *Baburnama*from a Persian codex never doubted the credibility of such narrative was present, however, he considered the lacunae in the text as deliberate acts of misrepresentation. Indian commentors too, usually historians, tend to almost never to question the veracity of the text as documentary history.

What makes the *Baburnama*so compellingly persuasive, that even as a personal record, it is accepted at face-value? Two stylistic features which have contributed much to its appreciation as a realistic depiction of its times is its straightforward, unassuming language and precise, remarkably detailed social and geographical description. The *Baburnama*preserves history, which is not found in any other historical source. The section on Hindustan, for instance, contains a description which, where verifiable, are extremely apt. For Babur, Hindustan was a world apart, "once the water of Sind is crossed, everything is in the Hindustan way land, water, the rock, people and horde, opinion and custom (484)." Because Babur was a total stranger to Hindustan, he captures it accurately. Though Babur could never forget the pleasures of his native country, he was not indifferent to the beauty of the new territories he encountered. Thus, the flora and fauna, the rivers and mountains, the customs and its inhabitants are all presented with an inquisitive and perceptive mind. He even fastidiously documented the currency system and the periodization of the seasons and time. This factual reportage is coupled with his terse point-blank delineation of characters. Babur always appears to be telling the truth without any compromise, so that when he describes his relatives, friends and foes, he mentions both their admirable and despicable traits. His balanced portrait of his uncle Sultan Husain Mirza is typical of his characterization style:

> He was slant-eyed and lion-bodied, being slender from the waist downwards. Even when old and white-bearded, he wore silken garments of fine red and green… (259) He could not perform the Prayers on account of a trouble in the joints, and kept no fasts. He was lively and pleasant, rather moderate in temper, and with words that matched his temper. He shewed great respect for the law in several weighty matters; he once surrendered to the Avengers of blood a son of his own who had killed a man .... Great ruler though he was, both by the length of his reign and the breath of his dominions, he yet, like little people kept fighting rams, flew pigeons and fought cocks (259).

Babur mentions the Mirza's inability to pray owing to some sort of arthritic problem, his wilful neglect of fasts yet his abiding by the law in weighty matters, namely in letting his son pay with his life in retribution for having killed a man. With these details of religious observance go hand in hand a fulsome sketch of the Mirza's genial and balanced character. He rounds off the description with a comment on the greatness of the Mirza as a ruler, who nevertheless much like the common man enjoyed fighting rams, cocks and keeping pigeons. Picturesque descriptions combined with details

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of physical feats (he also mentions his swordsmanship) and artistic inclination (in this case, poetry), all contribute to evocatively bring to life all those who are sketched by Babur. His descriptions are detailed and precise at the same time. Indeed, Babur comes across as a skillful biographer with much of the first section entitled "Farghana" devoted to recording lives.

These features of the *Baburnama*, so long as they function at a distance from the writer, give the text the aura of authenticity. Babar's claim to facticity is his professed disinterestedness. Babur self-consciously seeks to absolve himself of any misrepresentation of the figures he delineates or the facticity of the incidents. He declares that in his account"there is no desire to magnify myself; the truth is set down (135)." Babur's claim to truth is ostensibly corroborated by the candid admission of his own shortcomings and failures. He does not, for instance, hesitate to record his bashfulness in his first marriage, or his infatuation for a boy, though he always severely brands men with homosexual leanings as reprobate and immoral. He also records a few plundering missions.

Nevertheless, it may well be that Babur, being a man of his times, saw no reason to gloss over such acts, not considering them as exceptionally brutal. Too often, Babur's few and far between atrocities have been attributed to "his direct descent from those two ruthless scourges of central Asia, Chengiz Khan and Timur or Tamerlane (Edwards, S.M, Babur: Diarist and Despot 15-16)." Mohibbul Hasan, reacting to such criticism reveals it prejudice stating "savagery is not the monopoly of any particular race or nation. As the history of colonialism and fascism, and the events of the period after the second world were to show, some of the modern nations are capable of perpetuating worse kinds of barbarities which pale into insignificance before those of a Chingiz, Hulegh or Timur (186)." Further Babur was no sadist, his spectacular brutality was meant to "set an example," and demoralize those defiant and unwilling to submit to his authority. Thus, the trophy of heads on a pole, serves the same purpose as Macbeth's impaled head on a spear - to dishearten the enemies and win an easy victory.

According to Amitav Ghosh "written centuries before the discovery of the self, the *Baburnama*, is still astonishingly, a narrative of self-discovery." How true is such a remark? Babur it would be fair to say was a pre-modern if not a modern man. Stephen F Dale in "The Poetry and Autobiography of the *Baburnama"* more realistically appraises the text. According to Dale Babur's autobiographical narrative is very different from Rousseau's searing introspection.Dale also observes that Babur's narrative glosses over personal or familial particulars with scant attention to even a description of himself. While Babur does not measure up to Rousseau and his enlightenment sensibility Dale does accord him a place alongside Renaissance autobiographers, namely the Italians Cardano and Lelleini (638). There are occasional insights into Babur's emotional landscape, apart from our learning of his physical life, but 'self-discovery' is not exactly what we find. The inward search that such a term implies, with all its psychoanalytic and modernistic associations, simply did not obtain in Babur's time, as far as can be discerned. The *Baburnama* is unique being the work not of an artist but of a conqueror, who nevertheless created a work of outstanding literary merit. S.M. Edwards finds the *Baburnama* remarkable for the invaluable wealth of detail it contains, recorded by a man whose life was full of physical vigor and adventure, despite which there is no compromise in its quality (104). The list of miscellaneous verse found in the *Baburnama* prepared by Annette Beveridge is indeed impressive. It contains – a *diwan* or collections of poems sent to Pulad Sultan in 1519; the *Mubin*, a discourse on Islamic Law in 2000 lines of Turki verse, composed in 1522 written for his son Kamran; a 1524 tract on metrics; poems written during the period he lived in Hindustan; and the *Wallidiyyah-risala*, a poetical translation of Khwaja Obaidullah Ahrari's*Parental Tract*which was composed in 1528-29.

The *Baburnama*bears some resemblance to the chronicle, where Babur, as Stephen Dale explains, like contemporary chroniclers, uses poetry to "provide apposite sayings, decorating and legitimizing

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prosaic ideas with aphorisms of classical poets (640)." But the *Baburnama*is not another traditional *tareekh* (chronicle). Besides containing elements of the report genre (presumably a record meant for his people back home in Central Asia), the *Baburnama* is markedly different from the chronicle owing to the absence of elaborate literary artifice. Poetry in the cultured and literary language of Persian was formulaic and convention bound. The two traditional genres of poetic expression *ghazal* and *rubai* were increasingly modified expressions of courtly love, more so the former. According to Stephen Dale it was commonplace for poets to render amorous idealizations in stereotypical imagery. In like manner Babur also registers disappointments which were more generic than personal (644).Dale argues that the evocative beauty and the emotional resonance of the language, particularly of court poets did not represent a subjective experience, but were valued for their subtle variations of imagery and theme.

The *Ghazal*, a short lyric poem, is sealed with the *matla*, the final couplet which carries the authors *takhallus*, i.e. his pen-name, which, though appears to be autobiographical is actually more of a literary device. Stephen Dale persuasively argues Babur, eager to be recognized for his literary talent, wrote *ghazals* which could be interpreted as conforming to the literary standards of his day. Yet, at the same time, much of his poetry, interspersed in the prose of the *Baburnama*, reveals its worth as occasional verse as well.

The first instance of poetry in the *Baburnama*coincides with the actual stirrings
Of emotion, when Babur, it appears, was smitten by the sight of a boy in the camp-bazar. Dale quotes the couplet.

> May none be as I, humbled and wretched and love-side
> No beloved as thou art to me, cruel and careless. (120)

Dale postulates that an otherwise stereotypical abstracted sentiment is employed by Babur to depict his anguish and emotional tumult, as a lover of the boy Baburi. According to Dale in such renditions Babur "in doing so he was conforming to classical conventions in the Persian literary tradition. These conventions rather than being conducive to the celebration of rites of passage in the lives of poets"provided centuries of precedent for depicting distant, unresolved infatuations (640)." The rite of passage alluded to here is the first awakening of the love sentiment. Yet this episode in Babur's life is curiously incongruous with the rest of the text. Homoerotic sentiment, the *Baburnama*makes clear, was rather common in Babur's time, though Babur repeatedly refers to it as sinful. Describing an Amir in his uncle Sultan Husain Mirza's court, he depreciatingly dismisses him for his imprudence and profligacy highlighted by the mention of his being "a keeper of catamites (278)." The particularly fleeting infatuation Babur felt for Baburi, it can be argued, was narcissistic, Babur himself states "his very name, Baburi, fitting in (120)." Or the homoerotic verse may very well be a rite of passage, not to denote an impassioned emotional state, but the entry into versification! The second premise considering the prevalence of homoerotic culture in Babur's time is not as outrageous as it might sound to a modern reader. Whatever may be the reason behind the narration of the incident, its short spell, and its singular status, strongly suggest its incompatibility with the Babur of the rest of the *Baburnama.* Yet on the other hand, even the prose turns lyrical in this part of the text, "My wandering was not of my choice, not I decided whether to go or stay (120)." If indeed the incident is a factual one, which cannot be completely ruled out, it becomes one of the out of character acts which James Olney argues brings up the discontinuity of selfhood, "for it brings up one self here and another self there, and they are not the same as one another(24)." Babur's *rubais* (quatrains) and *ghazals* both display his readiness to explore traditional lyric genres as expressions of his intense frustrations. Dale identifies exile as a leitmotif in Babur's poetry consequent to an

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itinerant life traversing the territories of Ferghana, Samarqand, Kabul, Tashkent and several places in the Indian subcontinent. While in Tashkent, having surrendered Samarqand, Babur composes a *rubai*, which is decidedly occasional, representing his desolate state in exile:

One hears no man recall another in trouble
None speak of a man as glad in his exile
My heart has no joy in this exile
Called glad is no exile, man though he be (154)

While in Hindustan, Babur increasingly used the '*qita*', a genre with no rigid thematic or stylistic rules. As the name suggests *qita* or fragments allowed Babur to spontaneously express his ideas and feelings without encoding it in highly allegorical narratives. For example, Babur once sent a versified diplomatic note to the Nizam which playfully opened with a warning couched in a spontaneous couplet free of conventional artifice, "Strive not with the Turk, O Mir of Bayana, (529)."

The poetry in the *Baburnama* does not merely express secular sentiments, but also religious beliefs. Once when confronted by an enemy Ahmad-i-yusuf unawares, Babur received a blow on his unprotected arm which miraculously failed to cause grievous harm.Referring to this episode Babur waxes poetical and muses on the futility of all action if divine providence comes in the way.

Babur's religiosity is apparent throughout the *Baburnama* where one finds Babur fasting and praying, not even omitting ablution, even while on his wildest journeys, and in the severest of climes. As a Sunni, he had no patience with hereticism in religion and in visits to Bajaur, levelled to the ground the tomb of a heretic *qalandar* (mystic).Though religious, Babar was not beguiled by seemingly religious miracles. Oncehe visited a tomb in the village of Ghazni, which was rumoured to move when a benediction was read over it. Babur's keen intelligence detects the deception. He discovers that the supposedly magical movement of the tomb, which was attributed mystical powers was actually a hoax pulled off by the attendants at the tomb.Babur detected the contraption that was responsible for producing the effect and had the structure demolished and a dome erected over the tomb. The attendants were admonished and strictly forbidden from ever attempting to revive the spectacle(218-19). Throughout the *Baburnama,* Babur invokes God for his miraculous narrow escapes from death and misery just as he ascribes his disasters to His inscrutable Will. A constant refrain of the book is "God brought it right." The *Baburnama*suggests Babur's belief in the special relationship he shares with God, almost as a chosen one. Babur refers to the 'signs' he received from God, before particularly difficult battles. Most properly, such claims were created and shared with his followers to boost their morale. We know from the *Baburnama*that Babur was a believer, but not as perfect as he would think he is. He does disregard many Qur'anic injunctions, adultery and drinking wine being a couple of them. We also know that Babur used religion to manipulate his followers. From his battles with Rana Sanga, it is clear that he was not averse to using religion as a tool to muster courage and support. As Mohibbul Hasan explains "Babur's use of the words Jihad, Ghazi and other similar expressions should not be regarded as examples of his religious fanaticism, but as political expedience, for he was basically enlightened and tolerant owing to his mystic leanings and to his practical attitude to religion (190)." Babur, to whip up religious feeling, publicly renounced wine, before the battle with Rana Sanga, vowing not to touch it again if he is successful. Though his narrative suggests that he keeps his covenant with God, it is clear that it is done reluctantly:

while others repent and make vow to abstain,
I have vowed to abstain, and repentant am I(648)

Despite Babur's conspicuous manipulation of religion, commentors tend to regard him as a devout Muslim, and regard his ruthlessness as "consonant with the teaching of *militant* Islam (Edwards,

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SM. 41, my italics.)." The complexity of Babur's situation, his epoch and the role he was playing in it, is all too easily elided and reduced to religious dimensions. Similarly, just as simplistically is religion reduced to a generalization defined out of a particular instance of its practice. Annette Beveridge, appropriately translates Ghazi as 'victor in holy war' but Amitav Ghosh in his article on the text translates it as "slayer of infidels" even while he shows his awareness with Beveridge's text. The Qur'an the guidebook for Muslims, repeatedly stresses

Let there be no hostility
Except to those
who practice oppression (2:193).

Fighting in the Qur'an is justified only if there is a threat to one's religion, in effect the *Baburnama* no more represents the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad than do the crusades represent those of Jesus.

Babur, used religion in more ways than one. Much of the force of Babur's conviction in his own uniqueness derives out of his belief that he is specially favored by God, which he insidiously impresses upon us through the *Baburnama*. John Sturrock's statement holds true for the *Baburnama*as well. If autobiography starts in the writer's sense of his singularity, it also singularizes as it goes "it is the story of a singularization, or of how the autobiographer cause to acquire the conviction of uniqueness that has impelled him to write (14)."

Baburnama impresses upon us the uniqueness of Babur without our realizing when or how we were lulled into the belief. My guess is, not being an overtly self-indulgent, solipsistic narrative, the *Baburnama*insidiously immortalizes Babur, through the achievements it narrates and the achievement it is as a literary work of outstanding value. Babur, immortalizes himself in a way that demonstrates Sturrock's tentative statement "autobiography may only be the acceptable face of megalomania(13)."

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