



PICTURE OF ODISHA AS PROJECTED IN THE AKBAR NAMAH OF ABUL FAZL: A REAPPRAISAL

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ABSTRACT:

Abul Fazl, the court historian of Akbar (author of Akbar-namah) was one of the greatest historians of medieval India. He was not only an exalted and trusted courtier, but also a friend, adviser, minister, diplomat and military commander of Akbar. It is divided into 3 parts. The first volume of this gigantic work contains the history of the reign of Babar to Humayun. Second volume is devoted to the detailed history of nearly 46 years of the reign of Akbar. The third and the concluding volume known as Ain-i-Akbari is an administrative report. It provides a complete picture of different provinces of the Mughal empire during the time of Akbar. An attempt has been made in this paper to present the picture of Orissa as gleaned in the Akbar-namah.

KEYWORDS: *Abul Fazl, greatest historians, Mughal empire.*

INTRODUCTION:

Abul Fazl was one of the greatest historians of medieval India. He was born at Agra on 14th January, 1551 AD.¹ He was not only an exalted and trusted courtier, but also a friend, adviser, minister, diplomat and military commander of Akbar. Abul Fazl began the work of *Akbar-namah* in 1595 completed and submitted it to Akbar in 1602. *Akbar-namah* is by far the greatest work in the whole series of Mahamadan histories of India.²

It is divided into 3 parts. The first volume of this gigantic work contains the history of Timur's family from the reign of Babar to Humayun. Second volume is devoted to the detailed history of nearly 46 years of the reign of Akbar. The third and the concluding volume known as *Ain-i-Akbari* is an administrative report which contains information on mode of governing, statistical returns, household and court, regulations for Judicial & Executive departments, social condition, name of the travellers, Mahamadan Saints and moral sentences. It provides a complete picture of his different provinces (*Subahs*).³ But, Abul Fazl was cruelly murdered by Bir Singh at the instance of the son of Akbar- Prince Salim (later Emperor Jahangir) in 1602, who admits his crime in his Memoir. An attempt has been made in this paper to present the picture of Orissa as gleaned in the *Akbar-namah* of Abul Fazl.

Till the 40th year of the reign of Akbar his dominions consisted of one hundred and five Sarkars (districts) subdivided into two thousand seven hundred and thirty seven *Kusbahs* (townships) the revenue of which he settled for ten years at the annual rate of ninety seven lakhs thirty five thousand two hundred and forty six *Doms* (*sicca* rupees 9,07,43,881).

At first Akbar's empire was divided into 12 grand divisions (*subahs*) and each was assigned to a *Subahdar* (viceroy) for administration. The names of the *subahs* were: 1.Allahabad, 2.Agra, 3.Oudh, 4.Ajmer, 5.Ahmedabad, 6.Bihar, 7.Bengal, 8.Delhi, 9.Kabul, 10.Lahore, 11.Multan, 12.Malwah. But, after his conquest of Berar, Khandades and Ahmednagar the number of *subahs* was increased to 15.

Odisha did not form a separate *Subah* (province) during the time of Akbar. It was a part of *Bengal Subah*. But, Orissa was separated from Bengal and formed a separate *Subah* in 1606 by Jahangir.⁴

According to the Akbar-namah of Abul Fazl, Orissa was extended from river Rupnarayana in the north to river Godavari in the south. Orissa Garjats enjoyed the autonomous power and were not fully subjugated by Akbar. Orissa was divided into 5 circars (districts) such as Jaleswar, Bhadrak, Cuttack, Kalinga and Rajmahendri during the reign of Akbar. Jaleswar circar was divided into 28 mahals and the revenue derived from it was 50,052,373 dams. Bhadrak circar divided into seven mahals and the revenue was 18,687,770 dams. Cuttack circar was consisted of 21 mahals and the revenue derived from it was 91,432,730 dams and Kalinga contained 27 mahals and deposited 55,600,00 dams to the royal exchequer. Similarly, Rajmahendri circar contained 16 mahals and the revenue collected from these mahals were 50,000,00 dams.

OBSERVATION ABOUT BARABATI FORT:

Regarding the historic fort of Barabati, Abul Fazl wrote "At the capital bearing this name is a stone fort, situated between two rivers, the Mahanadi and the Kathajodi (Gunjoory), the former of which is held in great veneration by the Hindus. Within the fort are many magnificent buildings and it is the residence of the Governor of the Province".⁵ The country, for five or six *Cose* round the fort, is so low, that in the rainy season it is entirely under water.

In the words of Abul Fazl, "Here is a fine palace built by Raja Mukund Deo, consisting of nine stories. The first story is for the elephants, camels and horses. The second, for the artillery and military stores; where are also quarters for guards and other attendants. The third is occupied by porters and other watchmen. The fourth is appropriated for several artificers. The kitchens make the fifth range. The sixth contains the Raja's public apartments. The seventh is for the transaction of private business. The eight is where the women reside. The ninth is the Raja's sleeping apartments. To the south of this a temple is situated which is very ancient Hindu temple".⁶

DESCRIPTION OF JAGANNATH TEMPLE:

In the town of Purusotam, on the bank of the sea, stands the temple of Jagannath, near to which are the images of Kishen, his brother and their sister, made of Sandal-wood, which are said to be four thousand years old.

It is related that Raja Indradyumna of Neelkur-burbut, sent a learned Brahmin to pitch upon a proper spot for the foundation of a city. After a long search, he arrived upon the banks of the sea, which he thought, on many accounts, preferable to any place he had yet seen. Whilst he was debating with himself whether to fix upon this spot or to continue his journey in quest of a better, he saw a crow dive into the water and after having washed its body, it made obeisance to the sea. The Brahmin was astonished at this sight and as he understood the language of birds, he asked the crow the reason of this strange procedure. The crow answered, "I was formerly of the tribe of the *Dewtah* and from the curse of a religious man, was transformed into this shape; know that this spot is highly favoured by the Creator of the universe and whoever abides here and applies his mind to the worship of God, he shall quickly prosper.

It is a long time that I have been worshipping in this place and the season for the accomplishment of my desires is near at hand. If you are of the number of the righteous, remain here a short period and behold and comprehend the wonders of this land. The Brahmin, in conformity to the words of the crow, remained on that spot and after a short time, what the crow had foretold was revealed unto him, and of which he appraised the Raja, who built a large city and a place of worship upon the spot where the crow appeared. The Raja one night, after having distributed justice, heard in a dream a voice saying, "on a certain day cast thin eyes upon the sea shore, when there will arise out of water a piece of wood fifty-two inches long, and one and a half cubits broad; this is the true form of the deity, take it up and keep it hidden in thin house seven days and in whatever shape it will then appear, place it in the temple and worship it". It happening just as the Raja had dream, he, as instructed by the

revelation, called the image Jagannath and having ornamented it with gold and precious stones, he placed it in the temple, when it became the object of worship of all ranks of people and is reported to have performed many miracles. It is pretended that when Callapahar conquered this country for Soliman Goorzany, he threw the wooden image of Jagannath into a fire, which having no effect upon it, he ordered it to be cast into the sea, from whence it was again recovered.⁷

The above account of Abul Fazl is based on legends, myths and hearsays.

The Brahmins wash the image of Jagannath six times every day and dress them every time in fresh clothes; as soon as they are dressed, fifty-six Brahmins attend them and present them with various kinds of food. The quantity of victuals offered to these idols is so very great, as to feed twenty thousand persons. They also at certain times carry the image in procession upon a carriage of sixteen wheels, which in the Hindovee language is called Ruhth and they believe that whoever assists in drawing it along obtains remission of all his sins.

REGARDING THE TEMPLE OF KONARK:

Near to Jagannath is the temple of the sun, in the erecting of which was expended the whole revenue of Orissa for twelve years. No one can behold this immense edifice without being struck with amazement. The wall which surrounds the whole is one hundred and fifty cubits high and nineteen cubits thick. There are three entrances to it. At the eastern gate are two very fine figures of elephants, each with a man upon his trunk. To the west are two surprising figures of horse-men, completely armed and over the northern gate are carved two tigers who having killed two elephants, are sitting upon them. In the front of the gate is a pillar of black stone of an octagonal form, fifty cubits high. There are nine flights of steps; after ascending which you come into an extensive enclosure where you discover a large dome, constructed of stone, upon which are carved the sun and the stars and round them is a border, where are represented a variety of human figures, expressing the different passions of the mind: some kneeling, other prostrated with their faces upon the earth; together with the minstrels and a number of strange and wonderful animals, such as never existed but in imagination. This is said to be a work of seven hundred and thirty years antiquity. Raja Nrusingh Deo, finished this building, thereby erecting for himself a lasting monument of fame. There are twenty-eight other temples belonging to this pagoda, six before the northern gate and twenty-two without the enclosure and they are all reported to have performed miracles.

Regarding the sacred places and shrines of Orissa Abul Fazl writes "it is not proper that this country should be sought as an object of human ambition, it belongs exclusively to the gods: it is a place of continual pilgrimage".⁸

However, Abul Fazl did not mention a single line on the socio-economic conditions of the people of Odisha. It seems Abul Fazl never visited Odisha for giving an eyewitness account. His description about Odisha was mainly based on the data and source materials collected through his officials who were working in Odisha. The Barabati Fort was never a nine storied structure. It was divided into nine divisions. It was not built by Mukunda Dev as described by Abul Fazl. It was constructed by Ananga Bhima Dev-II in the first half of the thirteenth century AD. But, Abul Fazl mistaken it as a nine storied building. In spite of that his description about the sacrilege of Jagannath Temple by the most cruel iconoclast *Kalapahada* gives us first hand information about the attempt of *Kalapahada* to burnt the images of Lord Jagannath, Balabhadra and Devi Subhadra. His narrative also provides a flood of light on the famous temple Konark which was in perfect condition during the reign of Akbar.

There is a striking difference of opinion regarding Abul Fazl's veracity as a historian. No doubt he is accused of gross flattery, suppression of facts and dishonesty but, the new methodology that Abul Fazl introduced- the extensive collection of original sources and their critical investigation (the first rule that Ranke insists), was the most advanced attempt so far made in Indian historiography. The systematic collection of data by the use of official records and the rigorous investigation of the authenticity of every piece of information make the *Akbar-namah* a genuine work of research.⁹

Thus, from the above analysis, it may be concluded that, although Abul Fazl might not have visited Odisha to have an eyewitness observation, but, his descriptions about Odisha's administrative units, collection of revenue, military system though short are impartial and unexaggerated.

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