



Scribes and Epistolography in Seventeenth Century Mughal India: A Study of Nuskha-i- Dilkasha by Bhimsen



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ABSTRACT:

This paper addresses the role of scribes in introducing and framing new methods of history writing in the seventeenth century when Mughal empire was at its peak. It argues that majority of the scribal groups including the Kayasthas, Khattris and the Brahmins adapted to the Persianized methods of epistolography and literary traditions. In this context, the paper discusses in detail a seventeenth century account Nuskha-iDilkasha written by Bhimsen, a Kayastha scribe in the service of the Mughal nobility. The paper divulges political and social aspects of latter years of Aurangzeb's reign with a detailed reading of this text. This account helps us to understand the Deccan campaigns of Aurangzeb as the author's personal engagement with the political episodes of this period quite evident from the text. Moreover, this first-hand account facilitates a reconstruction of the social and economic conditions of the Mughal nobility in the latter part of the seventeenth century.

Keywords: Mughal Empire, Aurangzeb, Bhimsen, Nuskha-iDilkasha

INTRODUCTION:

Scribal Culture and Social Classes in Mughal India

As the Mughal Empire consolidated itself, its governance and sustenance largely depended on professional classes such as revenue collectors, bureaucrats, doctors and surgeons, most importantly scribes. Scribes were experts in the art of drafting decrees for administrative transactions, writing letters for bureaucratic business, and also writing first hand accounts of the events occurring in the Empire. In Mughal bureaucracy, the departments of accountancy, revenue and correspondence and epistolography were mostly filled by these Hindu scribes. usually Kayasthas, Khattris or even Brahmins. Some of the well-known Persianized Hindu scribes of this period included names of Chandrabhan 'Brahman', Madho Ram, Sujan Rai Bhandari, Bhupat Rai, Anand Ram and Bhimsen. By seventeenth century many of these scribes and literary figures adopted the Persianized literary culture that the Mughal state presented.

However, this tradition of adopting the Persianized literary traditions by the Hindu scribes can only be seen where scribes were writing for the Imperial patrons, or were in employment of the Mughal state, or were travelling with the Mughal armies or were based in the proximity of the imperial capital. It has also been witnessed that some Brahmin scribes of the temple towns such as Banaras, Mathura, Banaras or Jagannathpuri, did not adapt to the Persian methods of writing and continued writing in chaste Sanskrit. For instance, when Francois Bernier visited Benarasin 1665, he saw that in Benaras,

temple complexes also served as seminaries or institutions of learning. Brahmins taught the youth in these institutions of learning and wrote texts specifically in Sanskrit, a language considered sacred and preserved for the priests of the idols.ⁱ

Nevertheless, the growing presences of social groups that had been acculturated and that have adopted the Indo-Persian styles of epistolography were pivotal in production of new ways historiography. They were also in a position to frame new ways of writing histories and formulated new historiographical techniques.ⁱⁱ At times, these scribes also travelled with the Mughal armies and wrote first hand and at times autobiographical accounts of the events happening around them. Bhimsen's *Nuskha-i-Dilkasha*ⁱⁱⁱ falls largely into this category of writing, wherein Bhimsen accompanied the Mughal armies into the Deccan in later half of seventeenth century and gives a vivid account of Aurangzeb's Deccan invasions.

Bhimsen's *Nuskha-i-Dilkasha*: Anatomy of the Text and Historical Significance

Bhimsen Saxena belonged to a Kayastha family of Uttar Pradesh whose father Raghunandandas moved to the Deccan while in service of the Delhi Emperors. Bhimsen went to Aurangabad as his father was posted there in 1658 as an accounts officer attached to the Mughal artillery in the Deccan.^{iv} Bhimsen himself grew up in Burhanpur and Aurangabad, was trained by his father and even worked for him a while. From the late 1660s, he served as an officer under the Mughal military commanders in the Deccan such as Daud Khan and Bahadur Khan till 1689 when he became secretary to Rao Dalpat, the Raja of Datia.^v After the death of Rao Dalpat, he retired from service in 1707 and stayed in Datia an Gwalior. It was during this period that he wrote he wrote his memoir *Tarikh-i-Dilkashain* Persian that became a principal source for understanding the reign of Aurangzeb.

His memoir becomes valuable as it is based on personal experiences and direct observations and thus it becomes an important text to give insights into the military transactions during Aurangzeb's Deccan campaigns. More importantly, since he was a clerk with the Mughal military commanders in the Deccan, he had access to correct official information. Moreover, since his memoir was neither patronized by the Mughal Emperor nor was he dedicating this to any of his Mughal military commanders, he was spared from writing eulogical accounts of the Mughal Empire and also at times felt free to criticize the government of his time. *Nuskha-i-Dilkasha* covers military combats between Aurangzeb's army and the Marathas in the Deccan from the thirtieth year of the reign of Aurangzeb i.e. 1687 A.D. till the death of Aurangzeb in 1707.

Bhimsen was a witness to many critical events of the second half of the 17th century, in particular to Aurangzeb's campaigns in the Deccan and Shivaji's ascendance to political prominence. He describes the battle of Purandar, meeting of Shivaji and Jai Singh (who was the Mughal commander), Shivaji's visit to Agra and Aurangzeb's arrival in Deccan in 1681, Bhimsen describes his campaigns against Marathas as well as the annexation of Golconda and Bijapur in the first part i.e. *Tarikh-i-Dilkasha*. He goes on to describe in the second part how continuous wars waged between the imperial army and the Marathas, and how several forts such as Sagar, Adoni, Jinji, Raichur among others were annexed and how the Marathas became a threat to the imperial army. At the outset, while the text gives first-hand description of military combats and besieging of forts in the Deccan, it also gives insights into the dynamics of high politics occurring among the Mughal nobles. It helps us reconstruct the dialectics and actions of the nobility and their affiliated professional networks in the last half of the seventeenth century. The author very poignantly sketches the life and activities of important nobles (*mansabdars*) of the Mughal army who actively carried out the Deccan campaigns.

One such high noble mentioned in the text was Shaikh NizamHyderabad, who after submitting to the Emperor received the rank of 5-hazari and the title *Khan-i-Zaman*.^{vi} He earned a prestigious position in the eyes of the Emperor when he captured Sambhaji who was lying unconscious near fort Khelna and brought him as a prisoner in the presence of the Emperor.^{vii} At this achievement he was conferred the title *FathJang*. Similarly, another important army noble whose valour and military abilities have been highly praised in length is Itiqad Khan (original name Ismail Muhammad) son of Asad Khan, who got the title of *Zulfiqar Khan Bahadur* on the capture of Raigad^{viii}, and *Nusrat Jang* on the

capture of Jinji.^xOne military noble who was known for repeatedly defeating the enemies in several fights was Shihabuddin Khan later given the title of Muhammad Ghaziuddin Khan Bahadur.^xOther notable military commanders included Raja Anup Singh, Raja Jaswant Singh, Prince Kam Bakhsh, Ali Mardan, Qasim Khan among several others including Rao Dalpat under whom Bhimsen was in service. Hence the text becomes a bioscope to view the biographies and sketch the military careers of such nobles who fought on the behalf of the Emperor in the Deccan. In this respect it becomes one of the important texts describing onslaughts of the Marathas on Mughals till the very end of the Aurangzeb's rule.

Mughal Warfare and *Mansabdari* Crisis in the Deccan

Since it provides factual details about the military campaigns of Aurangzeb in the Deccan, it gives us a chance to peep into the nexus of the Mughal warfare, its military labour market and civil administration functioning through the system of *Mansabdari*. As far as Mughal warfare is concerned, their fighting tactics, bravery of the soldiers, and strategy of war are highly appreciated in the text. The author repeatedly mentions the enemy soldiers being large in numbers as compared to the Mughal army and despite this fact, the Mughal army emerged victorious in most of the battles. This indicates some superior military equipment or fighting tactics of the Mughal army that always helped them sail through difficult battles. Then if we look at the composition of the military contingents of the Mughal army, we can observe a kind of ethnic intermixture like Rajputs serving Irani nobles or Turani or Afghani soldiers serving Rajput nobles and vice versa. This kind of intermixture barring all racial boundaries presents a profane image of the Aurangzeb's army. It appeared, through the text, that the real building blocks of the military labour market consisted of the Mughal military and civil administrator's household, which, apart from his military soldiers, contained his own extended family and numerous personal servants, ranging from scribes and accountants to sweepers.

Moreover, the text gives ample information on how the military labour market functioned in the last half of the seventeenth century, where we see these *mansabdars* holding some rank, trading their military assets and becoming professional fighters. Repeatedly in the text, any official is referred to by his rank like a '3 *hazari*' or '5 *hazari*', eventually making their *mansab* a marketable value of its holder in the military labour market. Moreover, a *mansabdar* also seemed to function within the networks of patronage in order to upgrade their ranks and eventually upgrading their value in the Mughal military apparatus. Hence, we come across in the text instances where one official would gratify his higher official and then he would in turn recommend his name for raising his *mansab*. Not only in the Mughal army was this character of military entrepreneurship visible but also in the Maratha army which was dominated by Maratha zamindars who had earlier supplied most of the military manpower to the sultanates of Bijapur, Golconda and Burhanpur. These *mansabs* played an important role in the ongoing struggle between the Mughal and Maratha forces in the Deccan during Aurangzeb's rule in the late seventeenth century. Thus, in a bid to win over the tough Maratha soldiers Aurangzeb appointed innumerable nobles of high rank, *umaras* and Bhimsen even states that there were never so many *umaras* under any Emperor than under Aurangzeb.^{xi}

Similarly, in the Deccan, the Marathas were these military officials who had already established firm *Zamindari* roots and established their independent principalities. It was in this context that the text talks about the growing power of lawless *zamindars* making difficult for constantly moving *mansabdar*s to realize their salaries from far off assignments and gradually hurting the once effective *mansabdari* apparatus of the Mughals. Bhimsen states in the text that due to the growing power of *faujdars* and *zamindars*, *mansabdars* had become petty and it became difficult for a penny to reach *mansabdars*.^{xii} Due to this, there were no forces stationed at important places and newly conquered provinces and the control was getting fragile over the older provinces. The Marathas were in concert with the cultivators because they had developed local ties with them and were drawing revenues from the peasants.^{xiii} In this context we can say that Bhimsen also gives us some hints of the *jagirdari* and *mansabdar* crisis leading to the decline of the Mughal Empire that scholars such as Satish Chandra and

Irfan Habib talk about. Bhimsen clearly says in the text that the mansabdars have been reduced to the extreme point of poverty and it was becoming difficult for them to maintain troops.^{xiv}

While discussing the *mansabdari* crisis he also mentions that the *mansabdars* had been driven to penury and their subordinate officials had become corrupt. He specifically points out that there is a difference between (hereditary) writers who are professional writers and unprofessional writers.^{xv} He firmly believes that the profession of writing is sacred and in custom is hereditary and thus it only belongs to a class of people who are born in the social class meant for writing. In the ongoing *mansabdari* crises, the professional writers had been displaced and their posts were given to unprofessional writers. These unprofessional writers, according to Bhimsen, adopted corrupt practices such as accepting bribes for writing.

Another significant thing to notice in the text is the attitude of the Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb towards the Marathas and other nomadic tribes such as the *Berads*. Nowhere throughout the text have we witnessed Aurangzeb's policy to completely discard the Marathas or the *Berads* or any other anti-force in the Deccan, instead, he is presenting them with *mansabs* probably to enlist them into the imperial apparatus just like his predecessors had done with Rajputs. Bhimsen regards that the *Berads* were well versed in musketry. Probably, in a bid to enlist them into the imperial army, Aurangzeb presented the leading *Berad* chiefs with *mansab* ranks which could not, however, prevent them from cooperating with the Marathas. Their alliance with the Marathas led them to a repeatedly ravage villages and waylaying the caravans of the Mughal army. From Bhimsen's account it appears that in his eagerness to annex the southern kingdoms, Aurangzeb lavishly awarded high positions in the imperial service to all those Deccan nobles who were willing enough to defect. This not only exhausted the limited resources of the empire but also estranged the long-established mansabdars, because they were losing much of their salary assignments to the southern newcomers. From the text it also appears that this was the basic reason that caused widespread conflict and demoralized the established Mughal nobility.

This view of Bhimsen is also widely accepted by the modern historians who have substantiated that the Mughal campaigns into the Deccan overstretched the empire and brought its ruin in the eighteenth century. Satish Chandra and M. Athar Ali have argued that the main cause of the collapse of the Mughal Empire was the rise of conflicts and factionalism among Mughal nobility: the mansabdars.^{xvi} The growth in the number of nobles was not matched by a corresponding increase in the resources available to pay the mansabdars especially after Aurangzeb's rigorous conquests in the Deccan after 1686.

Topography and Cultural Traditions of the Deccan

The text describes, in detail, about the topography, social and cultural situations of the Deccan in the latter half of the seventeenth century. He describes at length about Kanchi or Kanchipuram which is one of the seven Puris, as they were called in Hindu traditions namely Ayodhya, Mathura, Prayag, Kashi, Kanchi, Avantika (Puri) and Dwarawati. Bhimsen informs us that the inhabited portion of Kanchi is not less than two *kos* in length and at both ends of the city are lofty temples, one called Shiva Kanchi, the other Vishnu Kanchi.^{xvii} He then describes vividly about the sanctity of the city and the abundance of temples in the city and its surrounding cities. He informs us that from the neighbourhood of Adoni and Karnul to Kanchi and the kingdom of Jinji and the ocean, there is not a single village in which there is no temple, large or small. Every place is named after Rama, Lakshman or Mahalakshmi. Then he also describes about Tirupati temple and gives us a picturesque view of its architecture and its hilly surroundings.^{xviii} While describing about the various temples he came across during his stay in the Deccan, Bhimsen drew an important inference that in many cases the temples worked as forts and forts acted as temples. He drew an analogy that the temples in the Bijapuri and Hydrabadi Karnatak are beyond numbering, and each temple is like the fort of Parinda and Sholapur. He claims that in the whole world nowhere else are there so many temples.

The reason he provides for such magnanimous abundance of temples in the Deccan is that the Deccan region is very prosperous and yields a huge revenue. Contrary to this, their rate of expenditure

is quite low where they subsist upon meager food and clothing. He looks down at their food and clothing habits and remarks that their food is coarse rice boiled in water, cooled and eaten with the addition of more water. Moreover, he completely disregards the kind of dresses the people of the Deccan wore and describes the clothes they wrapped around their bodies. The males wore a coarse kerchief on the head, a small cloth round their loins and a cotton sheet that sufficed for years.^{xix} The women wore a piece of cloth 3 or 4 cubits long for covering their private parts, in the manner of a *lungi*, leaving their heads and breasts bare. Therefore, he regards that all the wealth that is produced and collected was spent on temples and in buildings in which they had constructed temples which also acted as fortresses. He also informs that large sums are collected from tax (*mahsul*) on the temples where people come for pilgrimage and worship. He also claims that since these fortresses had then come into the emperor's possession, in many places towers and parapets and ditches had been added.

The book not only focuses on the temples and temple-cities but also on the prominent port cities of the Deccan such as Malabar (Malawar) and Pondicherry (Phulchery) where he saw the huge ocean for the first time. In the text, Pondicherry is described as the strong fort of the French and the Dutch who have many guns and artillery material in fine weapons.^{xx} It also gives details about the trading activities in the port cities and the life of the inhabitants in the area. In this way the text becomes an important source for highlighting not only political but also the socio-cultural and economic scenario of the latter part of seventeenth century in the Deccan. It also sheds light on another important sociological aspect of the Deccan: the 'matriarchal society' where he mentions women being the head of administration in Malabar and Trichinopoly. For example, in Trichinopoly he regards that the control of the lady ruler was such that none disobeyed her.^{xxi}

Thus, the text in itself becomes an important guide for its reader in the way it describes about the important cities of the Deccan, the society and culture of the region and also gives an in-depth analysis of the political economy of the deccan. Since the Mughal army was always on the move and was involved in constant fights against the Marathas, the text also in a way gives important information about roads joining one town to another. In this context, we can raise the question on Bhimsen's source of knowledge about the towns, roads, hills, temples and topography of the region. Whatever his source must have been, the information provided by the book becomes historically significant.

Conclusion

In seventeenth century, the new scribal groups engaged with the intellectual, literary and the cultural landscape that the Mughal state possessed. By the latter part of the seventeenth century, we also witness that these scribes were in a position to introduce new forms or redrafted models of history writing. This is what we see in Bhimsen's *Nuskha-i-Dilkasha* where a first-hand engagement of the author with the political scenario around him can be seen which also demarcates it from the earlier forms of historical chronicles.

The text elaborates that by the last decade of the seventeenth century till the death of Aurangzeb we can see a distinct shift in the attitude of the Mughal nobles in the Deccan with continuous wars. The course of incessant wars resulted in the depletion of resources along with deteriorating conditions of the mansabdars in the Deccan. Bhimsen also compares Aurangzeb with Shahjahan in the context of the frequency of the military conquests and condemns Aurangzeb for his lust for conquering forts. Thus, the book describes the steady demoralization, a general desolation and disorder of the imperial territories in the south as the endless wars against the rebellious Marathas dragged on.

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