

# Travelogue of Al-Beruni on India

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**Abstract:** This paper presents an overview on travelogue of al beruni on India.

**Keywords:** Travelogue

## 1. Introduction

Travelogue (الرحلة, literally "Journey") is a Classical Arabic term of a quest, with connotations of a voyage undertaken for the sake of divine knowledge of Islam. It is also a form of travel literature based upon the experiences of the travellers. The genre of travel literature includes outdoor literature, exploration literature, adventure literature, nature writing, and the guide book, as well as accounts of visits to foreign countries. This kind of literature may present an account of a cross-cultural or transnational travel, or travel to particular regions of a country.

The term "TRAVELOGUE" was especially attributed to the written account of the adventures of the Islamic traveller and scholar, Ibn Battuta. Ibn Battuta travelled throughout most of the Islamic world during 1304-1369 C.E., recording his findings in his journal, named travelogue.

Travelogue is a literary genre in which time and space are recorded and is considered as a valuable source to study culture and civilization. From time immemorial travellers have been coming to India and recording their impressions of Indian culture and civilization in their travelogues. Megasthenes, Al-beruni, Ibn e Batutah, Tavernier and a host of others have all written their impressions of Indian culture and civilization and their travelogues are considered as literary and historical documents. Over the ages there has been a plethora of travel literature containing diverse accounts of India in different languages of the world and some of which have come to be recognized as master piece of literature and a large number of them are reckoned as documents of valuable historical importance. These travelogues have been written in different points of time by writers hailing from various climes and countries. There are also writers of Indian origin who have visited different parts of India and recorded their impressions as they have seen them.

The travelogue writers have not recorded India's past and present only but have also taken the stock of Indian society and culture in their works. Strange customs and rituals practiced by the people of India, flora and fauna of the country not known to the outside world, geography and nature of the subcontinent, beautiful and incredible India can be seen in travelogues which are rich in socio-cultural input and perspectives.

*Al Beruni (AD 973 - 1048):* Born near modern Khiva in Uzbekistan, Al Beruni was conversant with Turkish, Persian, Sanskrit, Hebrew, Syriac (Armenian) and Arabic in which he wrote, and excelled in astronomy, mathematics, chronology, physics, medicine, mineralogy and history.

He accompanied Mahmud of Ghazni to India and stayed on for thirteen years, observing, questioning and studying. The result was his monumental commentary on Indian philosophy and culture — *Kitab fi tahqiq ma li'l-hind*. Not for nearly 800 years would any other writer match Al-Beruni's profound understanding of almost all aspects of Indian life. He read the major Indian religious and astronomical texts and highlighted parts of the Gita, the Upanishads, Patanjali, Puranas, the Vedas, the scientific texts by Nagarjuna, Aryabhata, etc. Al-Beruni also recorded some of the more egregious plundering by Mahmud of Ghazni, especially at Mathura and Somnath. For obvious reasons he didn't explicitly denounce it though his text betrays a definite sense of lament. He wrote that Mahmud "utterly ruined the prosperity of the country, created a hatred of Muslims among the locals, and caused the Hindu sciences to retreat far away from those parts of the country conquered by us to places where our hands cannot yet reach".

Little is known of Al-Biruni's background or his early life except that he must have had the privilege of belonging to a social class that had access to the best education of his time. On the personal level, Al-Biruni himself states, "in accordance with my natural disposition I was from my youth possessed with real greed to acquire knowledge." In pursuit of this burning desire, Al-Biruni began studying languages at an early age because for him language was one of the key elements in doing comparative study. Since Khawarizmian was his mother language, he was able to communicate well in both the Arabic and Persian languages. Of Greek, Syriac, and Hebrew he attained at least sufficient knowledge to use dictionaries in his studies. Later in his life he learned Sanskrit as the indispensable guide for penetrating Indian society. His command of Sanskrit reached a point where, with the aid of pundits, he was able to translate some Indian books into Arabic, and Arabic books into Sanskrit, as Al-Biruni himself informs us.

The region in which Al-Biruni was born was a thriving cosmopolitan center and had gained prominence in the wake of Islamic conquests. Although once controlled by the Abbasid caliphate, Khiva had long been under the control of the Samanids, a Persian dynasty, at the time of Al-Biruni's birth. It is well known that the Abbasid Caliphate, and later the

Samanids, were great supporters of art, literature, and learning. There were, therefore, libraries and learning centers that contained Greek, Syriac, Babylonian, Manichaean, and Zoroastrian books, as well as thinkers from different parts of the world. Hence, as stated above, Khiva along with other Central Asian cities like Bukhara and Samarkand, which presently seem so remote from the centers of civilizations, were then in the mainstream of the great international culture that had grown up as a result of Islamic influences.

*Beruni as a Source for the study of Indian culture and history:* Beruni's *Kitab al-Hind* is in many respects a valuable source to study Indian culture and history. Beruni's innovative and the data provided is generally accurate whereas the compilation data of his work namely around 1030 A.D. is known to us, his field of investigation, that is to say the territory covered by his research as well as his sources, is still subject to doubt. First, Beruni rarely makes mention of where his visits took place or when they did second *Kitab al-Hind* itself is lacking in positive evidence; finally, so much has been written on this figure and his life, that difficulty arises in distinguishing the historical events from the legendary ones. The definition of his field of investigation is however crucial for the purpose of using the *kitab al-Hind* as a historical source is an appropriate manner the question needs to be considered from various viewpoints, for instance in investigating others of his writing, such as the *Tahdid al-Amakin* or the *Qanun al-Masudi* or the secondary literature, both contemporary with Beruni and the modern nonetheless, I decided here to focus on testimonies of Beruni's direct observations and sources of information found in the *kitab al-Hind*.

Beruni's work and interest in discovering other cultures have to be considered as part of a living tradition. From the 8th c. A.D. onwards, scientific discoveries, combined with territorial explanations and geographical documentations became the main preoccupations in the Islamic world. Ibn Kurdadba (second half of the 9th c. A.D.), Tagir (middle of the 9th c. A.D.) and Masudi (second half of the 10th c. A.D.) are notable representatives of this tradition. Ibn Kurdadba an officer at the Abbasid court, bequeathed us the first geographical account about al-Hind mainly based on the written reports, Tajir was a trader who described his discoveries on al-Hind and China in his travel-diary. Masudi was an innovative historian and geographer of the time who travelled by land and sea to collect information from different places in the world influenced by the common tradition, however they diverged in the conditions under which they wrote and the method they employed. Beruni's account which has to be counted and this tradition is not solely geographical, but it includes different aspects of the societies of al-Hind. Beruni shows an insatiable curiosity in describing the customs and histories of the foreign people. In addition, his discovery of Indian culture is strongly linked with the rise of the Ghaznavid polity. Indeed, he travelled from Uzbekistan, his birth-place to the east under the protection of Muhammad, the Ghaznavid ruler. Beruni's mobility depended thus on the

conqueror's boundaries of Muhammad's empire. Therefore, a distinction between the conquered and unconquered world is needed to assess the depth of his information as well as the methodology he employed for gathering information.

*Problems or barriers obstructed Al-Biruni in understanding India:* Al-Biruni, discussed several "barriers" that he felt obstructed in understanding India. The first amongst these was language. According to him, Sanskrit was so different from Arabic and Persian that ideas and concepts could not be easily translated from one language into another. The second barrier he identified was the difference in religious beliefs and practices. The self-absorption and consequent insularity of the local population constituted the third barrier. He was aware of these problems so Al-Biruni depended almost exclusively on the works of Brahmanas, often citing passages from the Vedas, the Puranas, Bhagavad Gita, the works of Patanjali, the Manusmriti, etc., to provide an understanding of Indian society.

*Al-Biruni and His description of the caste system:* According to Al-Biruni the highest caste is the Brahmana, who were created from the head of Brahman. The next caste is the Kshatriya, who were created from the shoulders and hands of Brahman. After them the Vaishya, who were created from the thigh of Brahman. At last the Shudra, who were created from his feet. As these classes differ from each other, they live together in the same towns and villages, mixed together in the same houses and lodgings. Al-Biruni tried to explain the caste system by looking for parallels in other societies. He noted that in ancient Persia, four social categories were recognized a) Knights and princes, b) monks, fire-priests, c) lawyers, physicians, astronomers and other scientists; and d) peasants and artisan.

He attempted to suggest that social divisions were not unique to India. At the same time, he pointed out that within Islam all men were considered equal, differing only in their observance of piety. In spite of his acceptance of the Brahmanical description of the caste system, Al-Biruni disapproved of the notion of pollution. As we have seen, Al-Biruni's description of the caste system was deeply influenced by his study of normative Sanskrit texts which laid down the rules governing the system from the point of view of the Brahmanas.

*The Kitabul-Hind-a medieval reality:* Al-Biruni was a prolific writer, for it is mentioned that the weight of his books exceeded a camel's load! Among the many books that he wrote, *Kitabu'l-Hind* stands unparalleled in the range of topics that it examined concerning the Hindus. How and why did he get interested in the lives of Hindus is not sure, but he was deeply interested in mathematics and astronomy, subjects on which there was considerable Hindu literature. He must have had access to such literature and also contact with learned pundits who may have similarly been held hostage at Ghazni. Whatever may have been his motivation for studying Hindu society, his work provides a deep insight into those distant times. His book digs deep into Hindu religion, science, literature, philosophy, social organization, geography,

astronomy, life, customs, festivals etc. There is hardly a subject which he left untouched. His work was perhaps the first major exposition of Hindu thought and life by an Islamic scholar and it sheds great light on the then Hindu society which then was facing a challenge to its very existence from Muslim invaders. Though Islam came to India in the eighth century from the Arabian Peninsula, it was then limited to certain areas in Sindh only. Mahmud of Ghazani was the first to systematically exploit the fissures in the Hindu society and launch a sustained attack on Hindu kingdoms all over the north and the west. Al-Biruni was aware of the deep differences between the Hindu and Islamic way of life. He observed that Hindus were so different in all aspects of their language, religion, manners, usages and customs from Muslims 'as to frighten their children with us.' Their aversion against Muslims increased with the conquest by Mahmud by whose exploits 'the Hindus became like atoms of dust scattered in all directions.' He thought that 'the Hindus believe that there is no country but theirs, no nation like theirs, no king like theirs, no religion like theirs, no science like theirs. They are haughty, foolishly vain, self-conceited, and stolid. They are by nature niggardly in communicating that which they know, and they take the greatest possible care to withhold it from men of another caste among their own people, still much more, of course, from any foreigner. According to their belief, there is no other country on earth but theirs, no other race of man but theirs, and no created beings besides them have any knowledge or science whatsoever. Their haughtiness is such that, if you tell them of any science or scholar in Khurasan and Persis, they will think you to be both an ignoramus and a liar.' He however acknowledged that 'If they traveled and mixed with other nations, they would soon change their mind, for their ancestors were not as narrow-minded as the present generation is ...'

Though his views on Hindus need to be examined in the overall context of his work but there is no gainsaying the fact that eleventh century Hindu society was moribund, stagnant and inward looking for a variety of reasons. It had lost the glory that

it once had and it seemed to want to wish away the foreigners by erecting mental walls against them. If only they had taken Al-Biruni's reality check seriously, their history might have been different!

## 2. Conclusion

In conclusion, the movement of Beruni seems to have been modest. The predominance of oral and written transmission becomes clear from the proceeding paragraphs. Intellectual dynamism took place even in the case of isolated areas such as the Kashmir valley. In the conquered world as well as the positive of information's were both oral and written.

Beside his work on India in his works on astronomy, he discussed with approval the theory of the Earth's rotation on its axis and made accurate calculations of latitude and longitude. His poetical works in the main seek to combine Greek wisdom and Islamic thought.

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