

History Writing In India During The Period Of Timurids

Azamat Ziyo¹

¹Director of the Institute of History of the Academy of Sciences of Uzbekistan, Doctor in Historical Sciences, Acaemician, and email: labzak@umail.uz

Abstract

This study examines the development of Persian historiography in India during the Timurid (Babur) and early Baburid periods, emphasizing the critical role played by the Timurid rulers in fostering historical writing. The historiographical tradition in India predates the Timurids, drawing on oral narratives, religious texts, and epic literature such as the Vedas, Mahābhārata, Rāmāyaṇa, Jātaka, Hitopadeśa, and Pañcatantra. However, it was the arrival of Zahir al-Dīn Muḥammad Bābur and his descendants that catalyzed a systematic and sustained historiographical culture. Bābur's Bāburnāma, written in Turkic and translated into Persian, not only provided a detailed narrative of political, social, and natural-geographical realities but also laid the foundation for the autobiographical approach in Indo-Persian historical writing. Subsequent historians and translators, including Gulbadan Begum, Abū'l-Faḍl 'Allāmī, Bayāzid Bayāt, and others developed upon Bābur's legacy, producing seminal works such as the Humāyūnnāma, Akbarnāma, and Ā'in-i Akbarī. Under the patronage of Akbar, Jahāngīr, Shāh Jahān, and Aurangzeb, translation activity flourished, incorporating texts from Sanskrit, Arabic, into Persian historiography. This facilitated a synthesis of political, cultural, and natural knowledge in historical writing. The study demonstrates that the Timurid rulers' encouragement of historiography had a long-lasting impact on India's cultural and literary landscape. By fostering the production, translation, and patronage of historical texts, they secured an enduring place in the evolution of Persian literature in India, particularly in historiography, shaping both methodology and content for subsequent generations.

Keywords: Timurids, history writing, Zahir al-Dīn Muḥammad Bābur, Bāburnāma, Akbar.

1. Introduction

India, regarded as one of the earliest centers of human civilization, also possesses a centuries-long tradition of history writing. As in many other countries, the historiographical tradition in India originated from folklore, as well as religious and epic literature, and in this regard, India developed its own distinctive conventions. Indeed, literary-historical works such as the Vedas ("Rigveda" and the other "Vedas"), which were already in the mid-second millennium BCE; the Mahābhārata and the Rāmāyaṇa, dating to the second half of the first millennium BCE; and the Jātaka tales, Hitopadeśa, and Pañcatantra, composed in the first half of the first millennium CE, all give evidences of this claim.

The history of producing specialized scholarly works in India is likewise ancient. For example, the Arthaśāstra ("Science of Politics"), devoted to socio-political thought, emerged during the rule of the Gupta dynasty (4th–5th centuries CE). In subsequent centuries, the

*Corresponding author
Article history

: labzak@umail.uz

: submitted; 2025/9/15 revised; 2025/10/23 accepted; 2025/11/10 published; 2025/12/10

creation of historical and literary works in various genres continued to flourish on the Indian subcontinent.

Beginning in the 11th century, a new cultural trend associated with Persian language and literature emerged in the intellectual life of North India (including Pakistan). This development was primarily connected to the military campaigns of Maḥmūd of Ghazna (998–1030) in the regions of Punjab and Sind [1]. Over time, North India, initially the residence of vassals appointed by Western Muslim dynasties such as the Ghaznavids and Ghurids, and later the center of various local Muslim ruling houses, gradually became one of the major centers of Persian language, literature, and especially historiography [2].

2. Research Method

The consistency and depth of the development of Persian-language historiography there is evident from the fact that several renowned historical works were written in North India during the 13th and 14th centuries. These include *Tāj al-Ma'āthir* by Ṣadr al-Dīn Nishāpūrī; *Ṭabaqāt-i Nāṣirī* by Miṇḥāj al-Dīn Jurjānī; *Qirān al-Sa'dayn*, *Miftāḥ al-Futūḥ*, *Khazā'in al-Futūḥ*, and *Tughluqnāma* by Amīr Khusrau Dehlavī; *Tārīkh-i Fīrūzshāhī* by Ziyā' al-Dīn Baranī; and *Tārīkh-i Fīrūzshāhī* by Shams-i Sirāj Afīf.

3. Result

Having conquered North India in 1399 and uniting it into his empire, Amir Timur (1370–1405) appointed Khizr Khan (d. 1420), a figure from among the local elites, as governor of the regions of Multan, Dipalpur, and Lahore. In 1414 Khizr Khan succeeded in subjugating Delhi as well, and he and his descendants, referred to as the Sayyids dynasty because Khizr Khan was also a Sayyid, ruled the Delhi Sultanate until 855/1451. Historical documents indicate that Khizr Khan and his son Mubarak Shah (1420–1433) acknowledged their allegiance to the courts of Amir Timur and Shāhrukh [3]. Thus, during the first three decades of the fifteenth century, North India (the Delhi Sultanate) remained under the influence of the Timurid Empire.

Nearly a century later, direct Timurid rule and a Timurid political center were established there. It is meant, of course, the capture of Delhi in 1526 by Ṣāḥīr al-Dīn Muḥammad Bābur (1483–1530) and the establishment of the empire that became widely known as the Baburid dynasty. Considering that Ṣāḥīr al-Dīn Muḥammad Bābur was himself a Timurid prince, it is reasonable to associate India's development between 1526 and 1858, the period of formal Baburid rule, primarily to the legacy of the Timurids. Although such interpretation is not widely used in our region, the scholarly literature of both East and West has long employed historically precise terms such as “Gürkānid Timurids of India,” “Timurids of India,” and “Gürkānids of India”.

More than 330 years of Timurid rule in India, beginning with Ṣāḥīr al-Dīn Muḥammad Bābur, constitute a vast and significant historical era. It is widely acknowledged today that, over the course of these centuries, the rulers of this dynasty, who served as heads of state, made substantial contributions to the political, social, economic, and cultural development of the region. In the sphere of historiography as well, the connection between the Timurids and the Persian-language historiographical tradition of North India can already be discerned at an earlier stage, during the period of the Sayyids.

If we consider that the Sayyids were under Timurid influence for several decades, it becomes reasonable to associate, at least to some extent, historical works developed in North India during this period with the Timurid era. Although not explicitly, the renowned Iranian scholar Zabīh Allāh Ṣafā also hinted at this indirect connection. While discussing Persian prose literature from the early ninth to the early tenth centuries AH (late 14th to late 15th centuries), he lists among the historical works composed under Timurid rule the following: *Ẓafarnāma* by Niẓām al-Dīn Shāmī; *Majmaʿ al-Tawārīkh* by Ḥāfiẓ Abrū; *Ẓafarnāma* by Sharaf al-Dīn ʿAlī Yazdī; *Asaḥḥ al-Tawārīkh* by Muḥammad Musavī; *Muntakhab al-Tawārīkh* by Muʿīn al-Dīn Natanzī; *Tārīkh-i Tāj-i Salmānī* by Tāj al-Dīn Salmānī; *Mujmal-i Fasiḥī* by Fasiḥ Khurī; *Maṭlaʿ al-Saʿdayn wa Majmaʿ al-Baḥrayn* by ʿAbd al-Razzāq Samarqandī; *Ālam-ārā-yi Amini* by Faẓlullāh Rūzbihān Khunjī; *Tārīkh-i Turkmāniyya* by Maḥmūd Nishāpūrī; *Rawẓat al-Ṣafā* by Mīrkhwānd; *Ḥabīb al-Siyar* by Khwāndamīr; and *Rawẓat al-Jannāt* by Muʿīn al-Dīn Isfizarī. To this list, he also adds *Tārīkh-i Mubārakshāhī* by Yaḥyā Sirhindī.

Tārīkh-i Mubārakshāhī is dedicated to Mubārak Shāh (full name: Muʿīn al-Dīn ʿAbd al-Faṭḥ Mubārakshāh), one of the aforementioned Sayyid rulers. The work covers the historical period from the Ghūrids up to the reign of Mubārak Shāh. Its most valuable feature lies in the fact that it contains detailed information on the relationship between Amir Timur and, more broadly, the Timurid dynasty with North India, as well as important details regarding the circumstances of the Sayyids. Given that *Tārīkh-i Mubārakshāhī* is one of the few surviving works written during that period, its significance for understanding Timurid-era historiography and for the subsequent Indo-Persian historical tradition is evident. One bright example is that the authors of works such as *Ṭabaqāt-i Akbarī*, *Tārīkh-i Firishta*, and *Muntakhab al-Tawārīkh* relied directly on this text when discussing the Timurids and the Sayyids.

However, the significant influence of the Timurids on the development of Persian-language history writing in India coincides primarily with the reign of Ẓahīr al-Dīn Muḥammad Bābur and his descendants. In this context, the role of the dynasty's founder, Ẓahīr al-Dīn Muḥammad Bābur, is particularly important. Yet, for some reason, this aspect of the matter has not received much attention until now. In fact, the emergence of the *Bāburnāma* was not only a major event for the Turkic world and culture but also a landmark in the cultural life of India, especially in Persian-language historiography. To substantiate this claim, we proceed as follows.

Among the Timurids, Ẓahīr al-Dīn Muḥammad Bābur is regarded as the first to write a historical work after Amir Timur. Considering that it was relatively rare for rulers, or representatives of ruling dynasties in general, to author historical texts, the historical significance of the emergence of the *Bāburnāma* becomes even more evident. Indeed, aside from works such as Amir Timur's *Temur Tuzuklari*, Gulbadan Begim's *Humāyūn-Nāma*, Nūr al-Dīn Jahāngīr's *Tuzuk-i Jahāngīrī*, and Abulghāzī Bahādurkhān's *Shajara-i Turk wa Muḡhul* and *Shajara-i Tarākima*, it is difficult to find comparable examples of rulers producing historical works firsthand.

The *Bāburnāma* possesses several noteworthy features. In this context, we wish to highlight three of them:

1. Despite being written in Uzbek (Turkic), it exerted a significant influence on Persian-language historiography.
2. It laid the foundation for the emergence of the autobiographical genre in Indian historiography.
3. It became one of the distinctive factors contributing to the formation of the Abū'l-Faẓl ʿAllāmī school, which has long held a prominent place in Indian historiography.

Regardless of the language in which it was written, the *Bāburnāma* is the first historical work written after Ẓahīr al-Dīn Muḥammad Bābur conquered Delhi and transformed it into the

center of his empire. Considering that it reflects the new historical stage associated with the activities of the new dynasty in North India, that later historians relied upon it when describing these years, and that they wrote their works in Persian, it becomes clear that Bābur's contribution to the development of Persian-language historiography in India was highly significant. Historians of his own time and of subsequent periods were able to make use of the Bāburnāma not only in its original form but also in its Persian translation. The works of scholars such as Khwāndamīr, Gulbadan Begum, Abū'l-Faḍl 'Allāmī, Niẓām al-Dīn Aḥmad, 'Abd al-Qādir Badā'ūnī, Muḥammad Qāsim Hindu Shāh, Nūr al-Dīn Jahāngīr, Muḥammad Ṣāliḥ Kanbū, and others serve as evidence [4], [5], [6].

The fact that the Bāburnāma was translated into Persian during Bābur's lifetime, and that Khwāndamīr made use of this work to complete his Ḥabīb al-Siyar in 1529, explains why the Bāburnāma quickly entered the mainstream of Persian historiography. Although it is difficult to say with certainty whether Khwāndamīr consulted the original Turkic version of the Bāburnāma or its Persian translation, it should be emphasized that Ḥabīb al-Siyar and, by extension, the information it contains on the life and activities of Ṣāḥib al-Dīn Muḥammad Bābur—served as an important source for subsequent historians.

The first Persian translation of the Bāburnāma was done by Shaykh Zayn al-Dīn Khāfī, known by the pen name Vafā'ī, an eminent scholar of the period who served as ṣadr at the court of Ṣāḥib al-Dīn Muḥammad Bābur (d. 940/1533–1534). It is also known that Shaykh Zayn al-Dīn was among Bābur's closest associates, described as “the sovereign's intimate companion, the foremost of the counselors and advisers, and a pillar of Islam”. His name appears for the first time in the Bāburnāma under the year 932/1525–1526, in connection with the last and ultimately victorious expedition to India.

The recognition of Shaykh Zayn al-Dīn by Bābur is evident from the fact that, after defeating Ibrāhīm Lodi at the Battle of Panipat, Bābur sent him among a group of trusted individuals to Delhi to have the Friday sermon proclaimed in Bābur's name. Additional evidence shows that Bābur continued to rely on Shaykh Zayn al-Dīn in state affairs after 1526, including in matters such as developing abandoned lands around Agra and organizing military and administrative measures. If we also take into account that he was involved in drafting official documents at court, including royal decrees issued by Bābur, then there can be no doubt that Shaykh Zayn al-Dīn was indeed the one entrusted with translating the Bāburnāma.

Not only did he possess the requisite scholarly qualifications, but he also knew Bābur, his entourage, and his family intimately, and personally witnessed the events that unfolded after 1526. The mention of his name in the Bāburnāma alongside that of the distinguished historian Khwāndamīr was therefore no coincidence; it can be seen as a subtle indication of his talent in the field of historiography.

The increasing demand for the Bāburnāma within Persian historiography is evident from a number of documents. During the reign of Akbar (1556–1605), two new translations of the work were done. In 994/1586, by order of Behrouz Khān (d. 1002/1593–1594), one of Akbar's officials, Mīrzā Poyanda Ḥasan Ghaznavī and Muḥammadqulī Ḥisārī undertook a translation of the Bāburnāma. More precisely, Mīrzā Poyanda Ḥasan translated the first six and a half years of the narrative, while Muḥammadqulī continued the work up to the year 935/1528–1529 [7].

Later, in 998/1590, by Akbar's command, 'Abd al-Raḥīm Khān-i Khānān (964/1556–1557 – 1036/1627), the renowned son of Bayram Khān, prepared and submitted yet another translation of the Bāburnāma [8]. As is clear, even after roughly sixty years had passed, scholars continued to return to the Bāburnāma. Naturally, the cultural and literary conventions of the time, especially the strong tradition of composing and reading historical works in Persian

played an important role in this sustained engagement. For instance, Muḥammad Qāsim Hindūshāh, when discussing the translation made by ‘Abd al-Raḥīm Khān-i Khānān, emphasized that the Bāburnāma had become widely circulated among the people [9].

Furthermore, another significant aspect of the matter must be highlighted: namely, that despite the overwhelmingly Persianate environment, the Turkic language and its literary tradition did not lose their importance, and this was due above all to the Bāburnāma. Indeed, any translator who worked directly from the original text had to possess a complete mastery of Turkic, as well as the ability to preserve the stylistic beauty and complexity of the composition. Thus, the descriptions found in the sources are not accidental, for example, the characterization of Shaykh Zayn al-Dīn as “a man of external and inner perfection ... unparalleled in his time in the arts of riddle, chronogram, improvisation, poetry, and other genres of verse, as well as in prose and composition”, or the reports that ‘Abd al-Raḥīm Khān-i Khānān was fully versed in Hindi, Persian, Arabic, and Turkic [10].

When we consider the role of the Bāburnāma in the emergence of an autobiographical trend within Indo-Persian historiography, as far as we can ascertain, prior to the Bāburnāma, this narrative mode had not yet taken shape within the Persian historiographical tradition of the region. It was only after the composition of Zahir al-Dīn Muḥammad Bābur’s work, and especially following its translation into Persian that autobiographical historical writings began to appear. Among these are Gulbadan Begim’s Humāyūnnāma; Mehtar Jawhar’s Tazkirat al-Wāqī‘āt (995/1586–1587); Bayāzid Bayāt’s Tārīkh-i Humāyūnī (completed in 999/1591, although the author began writing remarkably early, in 949/1542); and Nūr al-Dīn Jahāngīr’s Tuzuk-i Jahāngīrī. In our view, these works alone sufficiently demonstrate the validity of the issue under discussion.

Furthermore, Akbar himself played a certain role in the development of this autobiographical method. When he ordered Abū al-Faḥl ‘Allāmī to begin the preparation of the Akbarnāma, he also requested that the living witnesses of past events write down their recollections or, if they had already begun writing, to accelerate the process. As a result, the works of Gulbadan Begim and Bayāzid Bayāt came into being.

Another important aspect of the Bāburnāma is that, although the work is structured in the traditional annalistic style, the author nevertheless strives to depict historical reality through a remarkably wide array of subjects ranging from politics to the world of flora. It is true that earlier historical works also included information on socio-political relations, geography, and other matters related to the natural world. However, in those texts, natural-geographical material was usually presented at the end of the work or confined to a separate section. A case in point is Ḥabīb al-Siyar by Khandamīr, a contemporary of Zahir al-Dīn Muḥammad Bābur [11]. In the Bāburnāma, by contrast, narrative events and descriptions of natural features are generally presented together, without separation.

This stylistic approach was later adopted by Nūr al-Dīn Jahāngīr in his Tuzuk-i Jahāngīrī, enabling him to produce a remarkable work [12]. A close study of the Tuzuk-i Jahāngīrī shows that Jahāngīr read and studied the Bāburnāma with great care. He even added four chapters to it and wrote several Turkic expressions at the end.

The scholar who rose to prominence by drawing creatively on the experience of Zahir al-Dīn Muḥammad Bābur was Abū’l-Faḥl ‘Allāmī. With access to both the Turkic and Persian versions of the Bāburnāma, as well as to a wide array of other sources and royal archives, Abū’l-Faḥl possessed far greater research opportunities than those available to Bābur himself. This is why Abū’l-Faḥl, working thoughtfully and without haste, succeeded in composing his celebrated works, the Akbarnāma and the Ā’in-i Akbarī, which brought him enduring fame and established the reputation of the Abū’l-Faḥl school of historiography.

Yet it would not be incorrect to say that the methodological principle which Abū'l-Faḡl later systematized, namely, the selective and orderly presentation of political, economic, social, cultural, natural-geographical, botanical, and zoological information was already embedded within the Bāburnāma. One example suffices: in the chapter devoted to the events of 932/1525–1526, the Bāburnāma lists, one by one, the fiscal indicators, specifically the revenue yields, of the provinces that had come under Bābur's control in India. Abū'l-Faḡl adopts and significantly expands this idea, describing the economic conditions of the provinces in greater detail and drawing extensively on court documents to present a wealth of numerical and descriptive data.

Thus, in the Ā'in-i Akbarī finds information ranging from the prices and yields of agricultural products, to the description of each province, to artisanal production, land area, and crop types; as well as data on the market prices in the capital and the standards of weights and measures. In short, the influence of Zahir al-Dīn Muḥammad Bābur's literary and historiographical legacy on Abū'l-Faḡl 'Allāmī's historiographical practice is unmistakable.

Let us turn to another dimension of the role played by the Timurids in Persian history writing in India. In keeping with the broader Timurid tradition, Zahir al-Dīn Muḥammad Bābur and his successors, who ruled India, consistently displayed great enthusiasm for historiography and strove to create the necessary conditions for its flourishing [13]. The number of historical works produced during their reigns is remarkably large, and it is beyond doubt that the Timurids themselves played a significant role in the emergence of these texts. It suffices here to recall only the major Persian histories composed under their direct instruction or patronage. These include Mehtar Jawhar's Tazkirat al-Wāqī'āt, Bayāzid Bayāt's Tārīkh-i Humāyūnī, Abū'l-Faḡl 'Allāmī's Akbarnāma and Ā'in-i Akbarī, the anonymous Tārīkh-i Khāndān-i Timūriyya, 'Abbās Sarwānī's Tuḥfa-yi Akbarshāhī, and Mullā Aḥmad Tatavī's Tārīkh-i Alfī (produced by order of Akbar). Additionally, Muḥammad Amīn Qazvīnī's Pādshāhnāma and works of the same title by Mīrzā Muḥammad Jalāl al-Dīn Ṭabāṭabā'ī, 'Abd al-Ḥamīd Lāhaurī, Muḥammad Wārith Lāhaurī, and Abū Ṭalīb Ḥamadānī were created under imperial instruction. Other notable works include Muḥammad Šāliḥ Kambu's 'Amal-i Šāliḥ (commissioned by Shāh Jahān, r. 1628–1658), Muḥammad Kāẓim's 'Ālamgīrnāma (at the behest of Aurangzeb, r. 1658–1707), Mīrzā Nūr al-Dīn 'Alī's Bahādurshāhnāma, and Mīr Muḥammad Salīm's Silsilat al-Salāṭīn, produced under the patronage of Bahādur Shāh (r. 1707–1712) and Muḥammad Shāh (r. 1719–1748).

Another significant development in Indian historiography during this period was the flourishing of translation activity, specifically the translation of historical works from various languages into Persian. We have already noted the Persian translations of the Bāburnāma.

During Akbar's reign, translation activity had reached new heights. Under his direct orders, guidance, or patronage, historical, geographical, and literary works were translated into Persian from various local languages, primarily Sanskrit, as well as from Arabic and Portuguese. Notable examples include the Mahābhārata (990/1582 – 995/1587, translated by Badā'ūnī, Naqībḥān, Abū'l-Faḡl, Fa'izī, Mullā Shirī, and Sulṭān Tonīsārī), the Rāmāyaṇa (995/1587, Badā'ūnī, Naqībḥān, Sulṭān Tonīsārī), the Pañcatantra (996/1589, Abū'l-Faḡl), the Kathāsaritsāgara (1003/1594–1595, Badā'ūnī), the Bhagavad Gītā (Abū'l-Faḡl), the Rājatrangīnī (Mawlānā Shāhabuddī), the Siṅghāsana Battīs (Badā'ūnī), and Nala Damayantī (Fa'izī) from Sanskrit.

From Arabic, translations included Ya'qūb Ḥamawī's Mu'jam al-Buldān, Rashīd al-Dīn's Jāmi' al-Tawārīkh, Shahrzūrī's Tārīkh al-Ḥukamā', Baḥr al-Asmār, Kitāb al-Ḥadīs, and Ḥayāt al-Ḥayawān. From Portuguese, works such as the History of China were translated into

Persian. Translation activity continued during the reigns of Jahāngīr (Ḥikmat al-Khālidah), Shāh Jahān (Āṣār al-Bilād wa Akhbār al-'Ubād, Timur Tuzūk), and Aurangzeb (Kishenbalās) [14], [15], [16].

4. Conclusion and Recommendation

We have examined the state of Persian historiography in India during the Timurid (Babur) period. Our primary focus has been to highlight the contributions of the Timurid rulers to the development of this field. Even without delving into issues related to the analysis and critical selection of historical works produced under their reign, it is evident that the descendants of Amir Timur held a significant and enduring position in the cultural life of India, and more broadly, in the advancement of Persian literature, particularly in the domain of historiography.

5. References

- [1] Muhammad Shabonkoraiy, *Majma al ansob*, Tehron, 1363 h.
- [2] G. Yu. Aliev, *Persoyazichnaya literatura Indii*, Moscow, 1968.
- [3] *Matlai sa dayn va majmai bahrayn*, A. Orinboev, translator, Tashkent, 1969.
- [4] I. D. Miklukho Maklay, *Khandamir i Zapiski Babura*, TI, Moscow Leningrad, 1963.
- [5] Gulbadanbegim, *Humoyunnoma*, S. Azimjonova, translator, Tashkent, 1959.
- [6] Abulfazl Allomiy, *Akbarnama*, Manuscript, OZR FA SHI Qolyozmalar xazinasi, Inventory No. 1345.
- [7] Ch. A. Storey, *Persian Literature. A Bio bibliographical Survey*, vol. 1, part 1, section 2, chapter 3. London, Luzac, 1939.
- [8] *Akbarnoma*, Manuscript, OZR FA SHI Qolyozmalar xazinasi, Inventory No. 841.
- [9] *Tarixi Firishta*, Lakhnav, 1321 h.
- [10] *Tuzuki Jahongiriy* (Tuzuk i Jahangiri), Manuscript, OZR FA SHI Qolyozmalar xazinasi, Inventory No. 11382.
- [11] Khondamir, *Habib as siyyar*, Bombay, 1857.
- [12] Muhammad Solih, *Amali Solih*, Lahore, 1957.
- [13] A. Ziyoev, "XVI XVII asrlar forsiyzabon tarikhnavisligi xususida Hindiston misolida", *Sharqshunoslik*, no. 6, Tashkent, 1995.
- [14] Nizomiddin Ahmad, *Tabaqoti Akbariy*, OZR FA SHI Qolyozmalar xazinasi, Inventory No. 1535.
- [15] Abd al Qadir Badayuni, *Muntakhab al Tawarikh*, College Press, Calcutta, 1865.
- [16] Zabihilla Safo, *Tarikhi adabiyot dar Iron*, vol. 5, Tehran, 1371 h.