

BABUR AS AN OBSERVER OF NATURE AND ENVIRONMENT

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This paper aims to highlight the perception and attitude of the Mughal emperor Babur (1526-30) towards nature and environment. The Mughal rulers show their deep interest in nature and it became a feature of their ‘dynastic personality’. Babur, in his autobiography, the *Baburnama*, vividly describes nature, the flora and fauna of Hindustan.¹ William Erskine rightly observes Babur as a dynamic sovereign, a naturalist, a warrior and patron of arts. His description of the countries he visited, their scenery, climate, productions, and industry are more full and accurate than will, perhaps, be found in equal space, in any modern traveller; and considering the circumstances in which they were compiled, are truly surprising.

Lanepool observes that Babur is perhaps the most captivating personality in oriental history, and the fact that he is able to impart this charm to his own *Memoirs* is not the least of his titles to fame. “He is the link”, comments Lanepool, “between Central Asia and India, between predatory hordes and imperial government, between Timur and Akbar”.² Rushbrook Williams rightly observes that during all the three years which elapsed between the battle of Kanua and the day of his death in 1530, Babur, ‘in the intervals of campaigns, he amused himself by touring the country, seeing it with his own eyes, and recording his impressions for the benefit of his readers. He also spent much time in superintending building operations, constructing for himself palaces, baths

¹ Koch, Ebba, ‘Jahangir as Francis Bacon’s Ideal of the Kings as an Observer and Investigator of Nature, *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, third series, vol.19, July, 2009, p.294 .

² Lane-Poole, Stanley, *Medieval India Under the Mohammedan Rule*, Delhi, Seema Publications, 1980, p.193.

and gardens designed as refuges against the burning summer heats.’³ He was keenly sensitive to the beauties of nature. His description of the “flora and fauna of Hindustan reveals his quickness of observation and his marvellous interest in natural history”.⁴ Mohibul Hasan comments that till the end of his days Babur retained his love of nature and his aesthetic tastes. He went into ‘ecstasies of delight whenever he came across a beautiful object, be it a natural scenery, a running–brook, a flower, a garden, a bird or a building. It was, therefore, natural that he should lay out orderly and symmetrical gardens excavate wells and tanks and construct baths and buildings in various towns of Hindustan.’⁵

Babur adverbs India on different world, “Hindustan is of the first climate, the second climate and the third climate; of the fourth climate it has none. It is a wonderful country. Compared with our countries it is a different world; its mountains, rivers, jungles and deserts, its towns, its cultivated lands, its animals and plants, its peoples and their tongues, its rains, and its winds, are all different.”⁶ Babur also comments on the defects of Hindustan, “Hindustan is a country of few charms. Its people have no good looks; of social intercourse, paying and receiving visits there is none; of genius and capacity none; of manners none; in handicraft and work there is no form of symmetry, method or quality; there are no good horses, no good dogs, no grapes, musk-melons or first-rate fruits, no ice or cold water, no good bread or cooked food in the *bazars*, no Hot-baths, no Colleges, no candles, torches or candlesticks.”⁷

³ Williams,L.F.Rushbrook, *An Empire Builder Of The Sixteenth Century : A Summery Account of The Political Career Of Zahir-Ud-Din Muhammad surnamed Babur*, Delhi, S.Chand & Co.,p.163.

⁴Majumdar,R.C.(ed.), J.N.Chaudhuri, S.Chaudhuri, *The History and Culture of The Indian People: The Mughal Empire*, Bombay,Bharti Vidhya Bhavan,1984,p.40.

⁵ Hasan,Mohibul , *Babur- Founder of the Mughal Empire in India*, Delhi,Manohar publications,1985,p185.

⁷ Babur-Nama(Memoirs of Babur), Trans by Beveridge,A.S., Delhi, Low Price Publications,(first pub. in 1921), 2006, p.518.

He shows his eagerness and anxiety when he first saw elephants in the Indian army. Coming from Central Asia, which had a different geographical scenario, he explained Hindustan as a different land having different grasses, different trees, animals, birds, custom of different tribes. He was astonished to find such contrasts. Babur's Hindustan covers the area which he had invaded the area across the Indus to the region of Punjab. Commenting on Babur's idea of Hindustan Stephen F. Dale explains that, "In any event, he does not separately describe the Punjab, the Delhi-Agra Duab or the Gangetic valley."⁸ R. Nath says that, "Babur referred to Northern India, that is, the Punjab and Indo-Gangetic plains as Hindustan."⁹ It suggests that the presumptions and impressions of Babur are largely based on the basis of the region of Punjab, but Babur discusses and informs about the other regions of Hindustan, about its sovereigns and their dynasties. He gives detail of those regions, which he never visited. Babur However, he also very accurately defined in his *Memories* about the rivers and climate of all parts of India including those where he could not personally pay visits. It clearly shows his keen interest towards environment and geography of those regions he visited. That's why some of his comments are based on information provided to him. Babur got surprised and impressed by the vastness of Hindustan, he comments, and "The country of Hindustan is extensive, full of men, full of produce. On the east, south and even on the west, it ends at its great ocean."¹⁰ Babur adds about the demography of India. Writes Babur, "Beyond Kashmir there are countless people and hordes, parganas and cultivated lands, in the mountains. As far as Bengal, as far indeed as the shore of the great ocean, people are without break."¹¹ He gives the names of the days of the week and describes the division of time of Hindustan. He also informs

⁸ Stephen opcit, p-357.

⁹ Nath, R., *India As Seen By Babur (AD 1504-1530)*, New Delhi, M.D Publications, 1996, p-47.

¹⁰ Babur-Nama, Opsit. pp.480-81.

¹¹ Ibid, p.484.

about the division of time in his country and compares it with the Indian division of time. Babur's perception on Hindustan is comparing and contrasting with his home country. Babur got surprised to see vast 'dead level plains'. Unique feature of monsoons equally dazed him. Perturbed by halted marched and difficulties in army movements caused by monsoons bemoans Babur, "Under the monsoon-rains the banks of some of its rivers and torrents are worn into deep channels, difficult and troublesome to pass through anywhere."¹²

He was extremely weary of 'the burning sun of India', at Agra, while ice at Rawalpindi equally surprised him. Babur as equally finds differences in seasons, "four seasons in those countries, there are three in Hindustan, The people of Hind having thus divided the year into three seasons of four months each, divide each of those seasons by taking from each, the two months of the force of the heat, rain, and cold. Of the hot months the last two, i.e. *Jeth and Asarh* are the force heat; of the rainy months, the first two; *Sawan and Bhadon* are the force of the rains; of the cold season, the middle two, i.e. *Pus and Magh* are the force of the cold. By this classification there are six seasons in Hindustan."¹³ Babur praised the rainy season very much. Babur discussed in his *Baburnama*, "Its air in the Rains is very fine. Sometimes it rains 10, 15 or 20 times a day; torrents pour down all at once and rivers flow where no water had been. While it rains and through the Rains, the air is remarkably fine, not to be surpassed for healthiness and charm. The fault is that the air becomes very soft and damp. A bow of those (Transoxanian) countries after going through the Rains in Hindustan, may not be drawn even; it is ruined; not only the bow, everything is affected, armour, book, cloth, and utencils all; a house even does not last long."¹⁴ In spite of cold and hot seasons, Babur is full of praise over in

¹² Ibid, p.487.

¹³ Ibid, p.515.

¹⁴ Ibid,p.519-20

quality of air. Though, at times moans over at, ‘the north-west wind constantly gets up laden with dust and earth.... so strong and carrying so much dust and earth that there is seeing one another. People call this wind Darkener of the sky (*H.andhi*). Hot weather often made him uneasy, “but not intolerably so, not as hot as Balkh and Qandahar and not for half so long.”¹⁵

He provides graphic account of the Indian rivers, that most flow from the mountains, records Babur, “Six rise north of Sirhind, namely Sind, Bahat (Jilam), Chan-ab[sic], Rawi, Biah, and Sutluj; all meet near Multan, flow westwards under the name of Sind, pass through the Tatta country and fall into the ‘Uman(-sea). Besides these six there are others, such as Jun (Jumna), Gang (Ganges), Rahap (Rapti ?), Gumati, Gagar (Ghaggar), Siru, Gandak, and many more; all unite with the Gang –darya, flow east under its name, pass through the Bengal country, and are poured into the great ocean. They all rise in the Sawalak –parbat. Many rivers rise in the Hindustan hills, as, for instance, Chambal, Banas, Bitwi, and Sun (Son). There is no snow whatever on these mountains. Their waters also join the Gang- darya.”¹⁶ This information is based on received information, because he never visited this region.

But it is constantly haunts Babur that there are so many rivers in India but running water is less. He writes that, “One of the great defects of Hindustan being its lack of running-waters, it kept coming to my mind that waters should be made to flow by means of wheels erected wherever I might settle down, also that grounds should be laid out in an orderly and symmetrical way. Babur bemoans again and again over lack of running water courses, but justifies that

¹⁵ Ibid, p.519-20.

¹⁶ Ibid, p. 485.

“They Hindustanis need not dig water-courses or construct dams because their crops are all rain-grown”.¹⁷

Babur was very fond of gardens. Many modern historians say him as a ‘Prince of Gardens’. His natural genius made him fond of all fine arts, and gardening. He built palaces and laid out gardens in many parts of his empire. He was a ‘horticulturist, and succeeded in naturalising some valuable fruits and plants in Hindustan to which they had formerly been strangers, and where they still flourish.’¹⁸ Strangely, Babur never mentions building a mosque or even praying in one, ‘instead narrated his life from the early days in the lush Ferghanah valley, far east of Samarqand, to its triumphal conclusion in India, he constantly and lovingly discuss the planning and construction of gardens.’¹⁹ Babur records that “The town and country of Hindustan are greatly wanting in charm. Its town and lands are all of one sort; there are no walls to the orchards, and most places are on the dead level plain.”²⁰

Mohibul Hasan comments that till the end of his days Babur retained his love of nature and his aesthetic tastes. He went into ‘ecstasies of delight whenever he came across a beautiful object, be it a natural scenery, a running–brook, a flower, a garden, a bird or a building. It was, therefore, natural that he should lay out orderly and symmetrical gardens excavate wells and tanks and construct baths and buildings in various towns of Hindustan.’²¹ J. L.Mehta writes that Babur as a lover of nature, and comments that Babur took ‘delight to be in the lap of natural environment where verses flowed like torrents from his lips’.²²

¹⁷ Babur-Nama, Opcit, p.488. Zain Khan, *Tabaqat-i Baburi*, trans. by S.H. Askari, Delhi, 1982, p.157.

¹⁸ Erskine, William, *History of India under Babur*, Delhi, Atlantic Publishers, 1989, p.521-23.

¹⁹ Dale F., Stephen, *The Garden Of The Eight Paradises: Babur and the Culture of Empire in Central Asia Afghanistan and India (1483-1530)*, Boston, Brill, 2004, p.2.

²⁰ Babur-Nama, Opcit, p.487.

²¹ Hasan, Mohibul, *Babur- Founder of the Mughal Empire in India*, Delhi, Manohar publications, 1985, p.185.

²² Mehta, J.L., *Advanced Study In the History Of Medieval India: The Mughal Empire (vol.ii: 1526-1707)*, Delhi, Sterling Publications, (first edition 1981,) 1984, p.144.

R.P.Tripathi also comments that Babur was fond of laying out gardens and making experiments in horticulture. His love for flowers and gardens would seem to have been described him as a “Prince of Gardeners”.²³

Ebba Koch discussed about the gardens of Mughal India and gave the references of James Wescoat persuasively argues that ‘Babur built his gardens in India outside the citadels or fortress palaces of pre-Mughal rulers in deliberate opposition to them, as symbols of the appropriation of land and royal emblems of territorial control. For Catherine Asher the gardens of the Babur had significance beyond mere territorial conquest and the introduction of a new ordered aesthetic.’²⁴

Babur gives detail account about the Samarqand and Heart and those beautiful areas. He missed Kabul also. About the gardens he writes, “With this object in view, we crossed the jun-water to look at garden-grounds a few days after entering Agra. Those grounds were so bad and unattractive that we traversed them with a hundred disgusts and repulsions. So ugly and displeasing were they that the idea of making a Char-bagh in them passed from my mind but needs must! As there was no other land near Agra, that same ground was taken in hand a few days later.”²⁵ Babur wants to make a beautiful garden for him in Agra. He adds that “the beginning was made with the large well from which water comes for the Hot-bath, and also with the piece of ground where the tamarind-trees and the octagonal tank now are. After that came the large tank with its enclosure; after that the tank and *talar* in front of the outer (?) residence; after that the private house (*khilwat-khana*) with its garden and various dwellings; after that the Hot-bath. Then in that charmless and disorderly

²³ Tripathi, R.P., *Rise And The Fall Of The Mughal Empire*, Allahabad, Central Book Depot, 1985 p.56.

²⁴ Koch,Ebba, ‘Mughal Palace Gardens From Babur to Shahjahan (1526-1648)’, *Muqarnas*,vol.14,Brill Publications,i997,p.143.

²⁵ Babur-Nama, Opcit.p.531.

Hind, plots of garden were seen laid out with order and symmetry, with suitable borders and parterres in every corner, and in every border rose and narcissus in perfect arrangement.’²⁶

Babur thus started a new system of garden making that was *chaharbagh*, or fourfold plot; ‘the water channels and irrigation system, which, linked to the fourfold plot, produce a formal geometrical grid pattern capable of infinitive extension also, the disposition of the garden on terraces and disparity in level between the elements of the grid and the flowerbeds they enclose.’²⁷ Babur seems as a great naturalist, his theory to plan gardens in the Indian land basically based on Timurids planning. Now only one of ‘Babur’s gardens in India survive, the Ram Bagh, which still exists, on the banks of the Jumna at Delhi.’²⁸

Babur seems keenly interested in the fauna and flora of India. He provides minute details on the subject and appreciated it with his great understanding. His perception about the fauna and flora of India has become an example for further studies, Babur elaborates with equal zeal and details wild animals, water animals, birds, fruits, and the flowers of Hindustan, shows his zoological knowledge and interests. He is silent about the cheetah, vegetables, crops, forests areas.

Babur when marched towards Sind, he first saw a rhino and later on elephants, near Peshawar. He starts his account about the animals of India with the elephant, and informs, “The elephant, which Hindustanis call *hat (h) i*, is one of the wild animals peculiar to Hindustan. It inhabits the (western?) borders of the Kalpi country, and become more numerous in its wild state the further east one

²⁶ Ibid. p.530-31.

²⁷ Dickie , James, ‘The Mughal Garden: Gateway to Paradise’, *Muqarnas*, vol.3, Brill Publications,1985, p.129.

²⁸ Ibid.p.129.

goes (in Kalpi?). From this tract it is that captured elephants are brought; in Karrah and Manikpur elephant- catching is the work of 30 or 40 villages. People answer (*jawab birurlar*) for them direct to the exchequer. The elephant is an immense animal and very sagacious. If people speak to it, it understands; if they command anything from it, it does it. Its value is according to its size; it is sold by measures; the larger it is, the higher its price. It eats and drinks entirely with its trunk, it cannot live. It has two great teeth (tusk) in its upper jaw, one on each side of its trunk; by setting these against walls and trees, it brings them down; with these it fights and does whatever hard tasks fall to it. People call these ivories (*aj, var.ghaj*); they are highly valued by Hindustanis. The elephant has no hair. It is much relied on by Hindustanis, accompanying every troop of their armies.”²⁹ While describing the qualities of elephant Babur records, “it crosses great rivers with ease, carrying a mass of baggage.”³⁰

The other animal which was never seen before by Babur was rhinoceros. He discussed about the hunting of rhinoceros in the Sind region. When Babur first saw it, he crossed the river Indus, and hunted them, Babur records, “After starting off the camp for the river Indus, I went to hunt rhinoceros on the Sawati side which place people call also Karg-khana (Rhino- home).A few were discovered but the jungle was dense and they did not come out of it.”³¹ Also writes, “This also is a large animal, equal in bulk to perhaps three buffaloes. The opinion current in those countries (Tramontana) that it can lift an elephant on its horn seems mistaken. It has a single horn were made a drinking –vessel and a dice-box, leaving over [the thickness of] 3 or 4 hands. The rhinoceros hide is very thick; he compared it with the elephant. It is more ferocious than the elephant and cannot be made obedient and submissive. There are masses of it in

²⁹ Babur-Nama, Opcit.p.488-89.

³⁰ Ibid,p.489.

³¹ Ibid, p.378.

the Parashawar and Hashnagar jungles, so too between the Sind-river and the jungles of the Bhira country. Masses there are also on the banks of the Saru-river in Hindustan. Some were killed in the Parashawar and Hashnagar jungles in our moves on Hindustan.”³²

He further discussed about the wild buffalo and writes that “it is much larger than the (domestic) buffalo and its horns do not turn back in the same way. It is mightily destructive and ferocious animal”.³³ Writes about *nila-gau*, “It may stand as high as a horse but is somewhat lighter in build. The male is bluish-gray, hence, seemingly, people call it *nila-gau*. It has two rather small horns. On its throat is a tuft of hair, nine inches long; (in this) it resembles the yak”.³⁴

His account about the fauna of Hindustan though very detailed but limited. He gave information about the various breed of deer then also informed in his *Baburnama* about gini-cow, monkey, nawal (nul), and mouse. There is no information about cheetah, Indian lion or any animal of its group in the account of Babur, it is very strange because later Mughal emperors were very fond of the hunting the Indian tiger. Abul Fazl gave the regions of the tigers in his *Akbarnama*. It suggests that Babur describes largely only those animals that he had himself seen.

He does not give any detail about bird-catching. Sometimes he compared some Hindustani birds with the Central Asian birds. The first bird discussed by Babur is peacock. He writes about the beauty of peacock and informs, “it is in Bajaur and Sawad and below them; it is not in Kunur [Kunur] and the Lamghanat or any place above them. Its flight is feebler than the pheasant’s (*qirghawal*); it cannot do more than make one or two short flights. On the account of its feeble

³² Ibid,p.490.

³³ Ibid,p.490.

³⁴ Ibid, p.490-91.

flight, it frequents the hills or jungles, which is curious, since jackals abound in the jungles it frequents.”³⁵

His description about parrot is also very interesting. He records that parrot is in Bajaur and in the lower countries. It shows Babur’s description of birds seems more thorough and full of details. Babur was not only a keen observer but also he provides minute details about some birds, he was greater interest in birds than animals. Babur’s details about include their colour, teeth, feather and many more information. He has mentioned details Parrot, Sharak, Saras, Wild-fowl, Ducks, Cranes, Magpie and quail (‘nightingale of Hindustan’) and many other birds. He also discusses some of animals who live in the water as lizard (crocodile), fish and frogs. He gives detail of these animals, “One is the water-tiger (*P.shir-abi*, *Crocodilus palustris*). This is in the standing –waters. It is like a lizard (*T.gilas*). People say it carries off men and even buffaloes.

The (P.) *siyah-sar* (black-head) is another. This also is like a lizard. It is in all rivers of Hindustan. The (Sans.) *g[h]arial* (*Gavialus gangeticus*) is another. It is said grow large; many in the army saw it in the *Saru* (Gogra) river. It is said to take people; while we were on that river’s banks (934-935 A.H), it took one or two slave-women (dadulk), and it took three or four camp-followers between Ghazipur and Banaras. In that neighbourhood I saw one but from a distance only and quite clearly.

The water –hog (P. *khuk-abi*, *Platanista gangetica*, the porpoise) is another. This also is in all Hindustan Rivers. It comes up suddenly out of the water; its head appears and disappears; it dives again and stays below, shewing its tail. Its snout is as long as the *siyah-sar*’s and it has the same rows of small teeth. Its head and the rest of its body are fish-like. When at play in the water, it looks

³⁵ Ibid, p.493.

like water –carrier’s bag (*mashak*). Water hogs, playing in the Saru, leap right out of the water; like fish, they never leave it.

Again there is the *kalah* (*or-galah*)-fish [*baligh*]. Two bones peach about 3 inches (*ailik*) long, come out in a line with its ears; these it shakes when taken, producing an extraordinary noise, whence, seemingly, people have called it *kalah* [*or galah*]. The frogs of Hindustan, through otherwise like those others (Tramontane), run 6 or 7 yards on the face of the water.”³⁶

Babur says very little or almost nothing about the vegetables but he provides detail account of fruits. He begins with account of the fruit of Hindustan with the mango. “The mango (*P.anbah*) is one of the fruits peculiar to Hindustan. Hindustanis pronounce the *b* in its name as though no vowel followed it(*i.e.Sans.anb*); this being awkward to utter, some people call the fruit [P.] *naghzak* as Khwaja Khusrau does:--

Naghzak-I ma [var.khwash] naghz-kun-i bustan

Naghztarin mewa [var.na'mat]-i-Hindustan.

[The couplet is literally:--Our fairling, [i.e. mango] beauty-maker of the garden, Fairest fruit of Hindustan.

Mangoes when good, are very good, but many as are eaten, few are first-rate. They are usually plucked unripe, they make excellent condiments (*qatiq*), are good also preserved in syrup. Taking it altogether, the mango is the best fruit in Hindustan. Some so praise it as to give it preference over all fruits except the musk-melon (*T.qawun*), but such praise outmatches it.”³⁷

³⁶ Ibid, p.501-503.

³⁷ Ibid,p.503.

Here bias is clearly evident. He missed his country's water melon, and defines it as a best fruit. He also writes about *kela*, *imli*, *mahuwa*, *jaman*, *kamrak*, *kathal*, *badhal*, *jujuba*, *karaunda*, *gular*, *amla*, *chiraunji*, *santara*. He also defined coco-nut, though he never visited those regions where it was produced. About the orange and lime he writes very much. Particularly he gave the regions of these products. He informs, "The orange (Ar. *naranj*, *Citrus aurantium*) and orange-like fruits are others of Hindustan. Oranges grow well in the Lamaghanat, Bajaur, and Sawad. The Lamaghanat one is smallish, has a navel, is very agreeable fragile and juicy. It is not at all like the orange of Khurasan and those parts, being so fragile that may spoil before reaching Kabul from the Lamaghanat which may be 13-14 *yighach* (65-70 miles), while the Astarabad orange, by reason of its thick skin and scant juice, carries with less damage from there to Samarkand, some 270-280 *yighach*. The Bajaur orange is about as large as a quince, very juicy and more acid than other oranges.

The lime (*B. limu*, *C. acida*) is another. It is very plentiful, about the size of a hen's egg, and of the same shape. If a person poisoned drink the water in which its fibres have been boiled, danger is averted."³⁸ Babur gives details of the fruits resembles as orange.

To sum up, Babur's account suggests full admiration and appreciation of the Emperor's sensitivity towards ecology and environment. He was a great naturalist, though at times his account reflects biases too. Babur encouraged gardening in India; he showed curiosity towards wonderful though diverse flora and fauna of Hindustan. However, it is interesting that barring one description of hunting of rhinoceros, Babur hardly applauds hunting, which became rampant during his successor's reigns. Amazingly, there is no instance where Babur involved in hunting in person. We also do not find any reference of birds

³⁸ Ibid, p.510-11.

catching either by Babur or his army. Could then we characterize him as an emperor -truly sensitive towards preservation of flora and fauna? Later Mughal Emperors such as Akbar and Jahangir carried the policy of taking interest in nature , was the result of Babur's innovative personality.