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Two Seventeenth-Century Central Asian Travellers to Mughal India

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Source: *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, Third Series, Vol. 6, No. 3 (Nov., 1996), pp. 367-377

Published by: Cambridge University Press on behalf of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25183242>

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# Two Seventeenth-Century Central Asian Travellers

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## to Mughal India

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RICHARD FOLTZ

Among the few published Central Asian sources of the seventeenth century are two very unusual Persian-language accounts by Central Asians of their stays in Mughal India: the memoirs of Mutribi al-Asamm Samarqandi, and the travelogue of Mahmud b. Amir Wali. Written in stylistically different but distinctly personal voices untypical for their time, these accounts offer the modern reader valuable first-person insight into the minds and outlooks of their authors and shed light on the nature of how Muslims in Asia thought about their world and its boundaries.

Several things should be borne in mind when considering the relationship of Central Asia and Mughal India in the seventeenth century. First and foremost, the Mughals were in fact an extension of the Timurid line – their contemporaries called them the “Chaghatays” – and as such they considered themselves and were recognized by others as the legitimate successors of Tamerlane. Thus they were actually displaced Central Asians, who throughout their two centuries of pre-eminence on the subcontinent maintained a deep interest and nostalgia toward their Central Asian “homeland.” Secondly, while Central Asians were not unjustly proud of their historical importance and lasting influence in Islamic learning and civilization, the region had by this time fallen into an economic and social decline which has yet to reverse itself, and had become peripheral to the Muslim world.

The first account, known now as the *Khatirat-i Mutribi Samarqandi*, was given that title by its Tajik editor Abdul-Ghani Mirzoev.<sup>1</sup> It is a chatty, personal memoir of the author’s short tenure as a guest at the court of Emperor Jahangir.<sup>2</sup> The second is Mahmud b. Amir Wali’s travelogue of India and Ceylon, published in a Persian edition by the Pakistani scholar Riazu Islam.<sup>3</sup> It was originally appended as a *khatima* to volume six of Mahmud’s vast work, the *Bahr-al Asrar fi Manaqib al-Akhyar*,<sup>4</sup> a monumental history of the world written at the behest of Nazr Muhammad Khan, the Uzbek ruler of Balkh (1641–5).

The two works under discussion differ enormously in style and content, reflecting the

<sup>1</sup> Abdul-Ghani Mirzoev, (ed.), *Khatirat-i Mutribi Samarqandi* (Karachi, 1977).

<sup>2</sup> There exists a sole known copy of the manuscript as a *khatima* to the *Nuskha-yi Ziba-yi Jahangir*, a work in the India Office Library, Ethé ii, no. 3023, therein and in Storey mistitled *Tarikh-i Jahangiri*. The anthology part of this work has been published in an edition by A. G. Mirzoev (Karachi, 1976).

<sup>3</sup> Riazu Islam, (ed.), *The Bahr al-Asrar: the Travel Portion* (Karachi, 1980).

<sup>4</sup> The travelogue attached to volume vi of Mahmud’s work exists in two copies, one in the India Office Library, Ethé no. 575, and the other in Tashkent in the library of the Institute of Oriental Studies, Uzbekistan Academy of Sciences. Sections of volume i also exist there, and an edition has been published by the Pakistan Historical Society (Karachi, 1984).

very different profiles of their authors. Mutribi's memoirs are written in a clear, simple, anecdotal style, while Mahmud's writing is deliberately difficult and abstruse, in the most convoluted tradition of Persian prose.<sup>5</sup> Mutribi, who was well advanced in years when he set off for India, wrote as an intimate of the wealthiest emperor in the world, describing the numerous favours bestowed upon him during his stay at Lahore which lasted only a few months. Mahmud, on the other hand, spent the first several years of his six-and-a-half year sojourn in India as little more than a wandering mendicant, often grumpy, irritable and hungry.<sup>6</sup> Arriving in India as a considerably younger man than Mutribi did – he was probably under thirty – and with no resources, contacts, or reputation to rely upon, Mahmud appears like something of a seventeenth century predecessor to the rucksack-toting overlanders of the 1970s.

But age was only one of numerous differences between the two authors, though their backgrounds in Central Asia had some elements in common. Mutribi was born in Samarqand in 966/1559.<sup>7</sup> Apparently something of a child prodigy as a musician,<sup>8</sup> he went to Bukhara after completing his initial religious education. There he became a disciple of the illustrious Naqshbandi sheikh Khwaja Hasan Nisari, under whose tutelage he developed his appreciation for poetry and literature. Mahmud was born in Balkh, which was ruled as an apanage territory<sup>9</sup> of Bukhara. His birthdate is uncertain, but from subsequent events of his career it would appear to have been somewhere around 1595–8. He received his education at Bukhara, and composed a *masnavi* entitled *Mahabbat-nama* and a divan known as *Najm-i saqib* while still young.<sup>10</sup> He became a disciple of Sheikh Sayyid Mirakshah al-Husayni and spent ten years in a sufi hermitage. During that time he composed the *Rava'ih-i tayyiba*, and dedicated it to his sheikh.

Mutribi, meanwhile, had been enjoying the patronage of the Ashtarkhanid ruler Wali Muhammad, for whom he composed an anthology of poets in 1013/1604.<sup>11</sup> It was after the death of his patron in 1021/1612 that Mutribi decided to travel, as many of his countrymen had done, to Mughal India in search of increased fame and fortune. Unfortunately, the responsibility of supporting 20 family members in Samarqand delayed him until their collective financial situation at last in 1030/1620 permitted him to begin preparations for his journey. It seems to have occurred to Mutribi about this time to revise his earlier anthology as a gift by which to ingratiate himself with Emperor Jahangir. With this aim in mind he spent two years in Balkh and Badakhshan gathering additional information on Central

<sup>5</sup> I would like to thank Ahmad Mahdavi-Damghani for helping me through the flowery maze of Mahmud's style, and also for clarifying certain passages of Mutribi's language.

<sup>6</sup> As early as Kabul Mahmud complains of despair and loneliness, until a friendly stranger offers to feed him out of pity (Mahmud, p. 2). Later, on his first visit to the famed former capital of Agra, he and a temporary travel companion become so exasperated at the lack of instant charity that they decide to leave the town immediately, without having seen anything (Mahmud, pp. 17–18).

<sup>7</sup> Much of the biographical information on Mutribi, about whom nothing is said in any contemporary sources known to me, is culled from Mirzoev's Persian introduction to his edition of the *Khatirat*.

<sup>8</sup> "Mutribi," the author's sobriquet rather than his given name which is unknown to us, means "minstrel," or "hired musician."

<sup>9</sup> *Tiyul* or *mamlakat*. See R. D. McChesney, "The Amirs of Muslim Central Asia," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, XXVI (1980), p. 51.

<sup>10</sup> B. G. Gafurov, "The Bahr al-Asrar II", *Journal of the Pakistan Historical Society*, XIV/2 (1966), p. 99.

<sup>11</sup> The manuscript is in the library of the Institute of Oriental Studies of the Uzbekistan Academy of Sciences, no. 2253.

Asian poets, and after spending a further year revising his work, he left for Lahore, arriving there in 1036/1626 at the ripe old age of 70.

One can surmise that Mutribi's motivations in travelling to India at such an advanced age were to a great degree financial. From the intensity with which he prepared his "offering" for Jahangir and the brevity of his stay once received at court it appears he hoped to make a quick killing. In his first audience with the Emperor, Mutribi is told he will be given four things: spending money, clothing, a horse, and a slave boy. When Jahangir asks which his guest would like first, Mutribi unabashedly says he'll take the money.<sup>12</sup> In a later session, when Jahangir asks whether he would prefer to be given a *turani* (Central Asian) or an 'iraqi (Western Iranian) horse, Mutribi says, "whichever is more expensive."<sup>13</sup>

The suspicion that Mutribi's interest in India centred on material gain is further supported by the fact that once he sufficiently attained his desires – Jahangir seems to have been more than generous in heaping gifts upon him – he was impatient to return to Samarqand, fervently begging the emperor's leave after only two months in Lahore, and then stubbornly insisting despite the initial refusal of his royal host, who urged him to come on a trip to Kashmir instead.<sup>14</sup>

Mutribi may still have felt the burden of family obligations, since he gave these responsibilities as his excuse for leaving India so hastily. However, since Jahangir's offer to send money to Samarqand for Mutribi's family to come and join him in India does not seem to have influenced him, it might be more accurate to surmise that Mutribi simply did not care for India or have any interest in staying there once his personal mission had been fulfilled.<sup>15</sup> In the end Jahangir released his elderly visitor, after extracting a promise that Mutribi would return to Lahore the following year. But as the Emperor himself died only a few months later, it is unlikely that Mutribi, who was 71 when he returned home to Samarqand in 1037/1626, could or did ever make a second trip to India.

Mahmud's ambitions seem to have been both more modest and less materialistic, at least initially. He is generally far more observant and interested in what he sees than is Mutribi. His restless travels across India, which lasted from 1624–31, appear to have been motivated mainly by curiosity and traveller's itch. His account fits in well with a tradition dating back at least to the tenth century, which one can refer to as "wonder literature" (*adabiyat-i 'aja'ib*), in which India is portrayed by Muslim travellers as a "land of the miraculous." Early examples of this type of travel account are included in the *Kitab 'aja'ib al-hind*, written around 956, attributed (probably falsely) to an Iranian sea-captain by the name of Buzurg b. Shahriar, whose account is one of several in that collection.<sup>15a</sup> The first major such work by a Central Asian Muslim is, of course, the *Kitab fi tahqiq ma li'l-hind* of Abu Raihan Muhammad b. Ahmad al-Biruni, written in the early eleventh century.<sup>15b</sup> It is clear from

<sup>12</sup> Mutribi, p. 17.

<sup>13</sup> Mutribi, p. 32; To this Jahangir somewhat mockingly replies that while 'iraqi horses are more expensive, they are also harder to handle, implying that such a horse might be too much for the elderly Mutribi.

<sup>14</sup> Mutribi, p. 71.

<sup>15</sup> His only positive observation about India seems to be that it has very tasty ducks, a fact which previous Central Asian travellers had also noted (Mutribi, p. 36).

<sup>15a</sup> See the discussion in André Miquel, *La géographie humaine du monde musulman jusqu'au milieu du 11e siècle* (Paris and The Hague, 1972), pp. 127–32.

<sup>15b</sup> E. C. Sachau, ed. and tr., *Alberuni's India* (London, 1888; abridged version New York, 1971).

the introductory remarks to his travelogue that the land of India possessed an awesome reputation in the minds of Central Asians. Mahmud writes:

Since the immensity of India is full of seemly people, garnished with numerous rarities and symbols which witness the perfect force [of God], and landscapes illuminated by refinements and abundant grace, and the traces of Creation and the secrets of invention are to be found there, the bird of my intention took off in flight in that direction.<sup>16</sup>

But Mahmud seems moreover to have been drawn by a personal fascination for Hindu women. Riazul Islam goes so far as to say that “certain passages suggest that this was one of his chief aims in wandering about.”<sup>17</sup> Indeed he may have begun to cultivate a taste for Indian girls before ever leaving home, as many Hindu merchant families were living in Central Asian cities at that time,<sup>18</sup> but once in India his senses are overwhelmed. One of Mahmud’s most emotional passages is his description of ritual bathing in the Jumna beside Raja Man Singh’s temple at Mathura:

. . . then the Hindus man and woman, great and small, rich and poor go to the banks of the river and without shame, cloak or modesty mix together and rejoice in the sound of the bell and perform their useless ceremonies, while thousands of vagabonds and capricious persons stand on the bank with hopeful, enthusiastic hearts and watch them. Many are Muslims, who are attracted by the ceremony and mix with them.<sup>19</sup>

It takes little imagination to visualize the narrator himself as part of the latter group, particularly when he adds apologetically, “Really it is not surprising that in this nice landscape with so many beautiful women, the feet of Muslims slip and their purity is broken by the stones of their beauty.”<sup>20</sup> Mahmud recounts other such examples of his own wet-sari voyeurism. At Benares, having barely survived the journey from Patna on which he saw three Hindu travellers die of fatigue and was himself carried into town on the back of another, Mahmud sleeps for a day and on regathering his strength is told encouragingly by his Hindu hosts that such near brushes with death can trigger enlightenment. Hoping to assist in his salvation they promptly take him to the bank of the Ganges where instead, once again, the young Central Asian is overcome by the beauty of the female Hindu bathers, who appear to him as “a hundred rose petals in every corner.”<sup>21</sup>

Mutribi, for his part, while also proving vulnerable to Indian beauty, seems to have preferred young boys. Jahangir almost seems to be taunting him when one evening, after

<sup>16</sup> Mahmud, p. 1. It is interesting to compare Mahmud’s preconceptions of the grandeur of India with those of Central Asian Muslims in other periods. The ninth-century Central Asian poet Rudaki, considered to be the first great poet of the modern Persian language, wrote: “The thorn that will prick me when I go to India/Is better than staying at home with a bunch of fragrant flowers in my hand” (*khari ke be man dar khalad andar safar-i Hind/beh chun be hadar dar kaf-i man daste-i saburi*) (Gafurov, 1966, pp. 101–2). In his memoirs the first Mughal Emperor Babur, no great lover of India, after listing the many defects of the country concedes that it is indeed vast and full of resources, both mineral and human, and that its air during the monsoon season is delightful. (*The Babur-nāma in English*, tr. Annette Beveridge (London, 1921), p. 519.)

<sup>17</sup> Riazul Islam, “The Bahr al-Asrar I,” *Journal of the Pakistan Historical Society*, XIV/2 (1966), p. 95.

<sup>18</sup> A. A. Semenov, “K voprosu o kul’turno-politicheskikh svyaziakh Bukhary i ‘Velikomogol’skoi’ Indii v XVII v.,” in *Materialy vtorogo soveschaniia arkheologov i etnografov Srednei Azii* (Moscow, 1959), p. 9; Stephen Dale, *Indian Merchants and Eurasian Trade, 1600–1750* (Cambridge, 1994), p. 45.

<sup>19</sup> Mahmud, p. 15.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> Mahmud, p. 22.

asking the mulla which type of skin colour is most attractive, he calls for two slave boys, one white and one black, to be brought to stand at each side of his venerable guest.<sup>22</sup>

. . . on my right a black-coloured child stood, but what a heart-breaker! Just seeing him took away my heart . . . by my left side stood a white-skinned boy, the ultimate in goodness and delicateness, to amaze the eye.<sup>23</sup>

Poor Mutribi's gaze keeps flitting back and forth between the two, until he cannot tell which is white and which is black, and the two boys meld together in his eyes into a sort of "candy-green" colour. Jahangir, obviously amused, agrees; yes, indeed, green must be the best colour of all for a slave boy!

If the elderly mulla from Samarqand proved a great source of entertainment for the Mughal emperor,<sup>24</sup> this is not to say that Mutribi's appeal for Jahangir was merely that of a buffoon, at least any more than with anyone who came into the royal presence. If Jahangir appears in Mutribi's work to have enjoyed good-natured mockery, the tone of his own memoirs, as well, suggests a condescending sort of personality. He also seems to have been intoxicated on wine and opium much of the time, which could account in part for his bantering nature.<sup>25</sup> On the other hand what is certainly clear, even filtering out the self-important bias of Mutribi's narrative, is that Jahangir valued him as an important source of news and information from Central Asia.

Moreover, the tone of the Emperor's frequent questions to Mutribi about Central Asian people and places is distinctly compatriotic: he inquires about the Juybari sheikhs of Bukhara as of mutual acquaintances, and of local affairs in the manner of a longtime expatriate plying a more recent one for the latest gossip from home. Given that no Mughal monarch since Jahangir's grandfather had ever set foot on Central Asian soil, this attitude provides a curious testimony to the dynasty's nostalgic mentality, which persisted unsatisfied for at least three further generations.<sup>26</sup>

In his first interviews with Jahangir, Mutribi asks anxiously about the anthology he has offered the Emperor. Jahangir, who clearly has not bothered to look at the gift yet, keeps changing the subject to Samarqand. The first thing he wants to know is, what is the state of repair of the *Gur-i Amir* (Tamerlane's tomb)?<sup>27</sup> Mutribi coyly replies that he detailed this in

<sup>22</sup> It is worth noting that some 14 years earlier Jahangir had taunted an ambassador of Mutribi's countryman Imam Quli Khan about that ruler's alleged pederasty, an exchange which resulted in diplomatic ties between the Uzbeks and Mughals being broken for seven years and renewed only at the instigation of Nur Jahan (Semenov, 1959, p. 9). Jahangir seems to have revelled in teasing Central Asians about homosexual matters.

<sup>23</sup> Mutribi, p. 39.

<sup>24</sup> Later on Jahangir sold Mutribi's son Muhammad 'Ali a slave boy who turned out to be deaf (Mutribi, pp. 53-4). The following day when Mutribi came to pay for the slave the Emperor mischievously asked Mutribi about it, and in the end gave him the slave for nothing along with 1,000 rupees for good measure. Mutribi, saving his own face perhaps, goes on to say that the slave served him excellently, and cites a story about a famously pious deaf slave in the Samarqand bazaar.

<sup>25</sup> In the *Tuzuk-i Jahangiri*, the emperor describes in detail his daily intake of wine and opium, as well as his attempts to moderate his addictions. In the end, it was probably this lifestyle that brought on his death. Certain modern South Asian scholars, such as Bani Prasad, have taken issue with the traditional depiction of Jahangir as an intellectual lush ruled by his Persian wife Nur Jahan. While the stereotype is perhaps exaggerated, the examples cited above do draw a fairly vivid portrait of the Emperor's character.

<sup>26</sup> The nostalgic mentality of the first six Mughal emperors toward their ancestral lands is more fully explored in my doctoral dissertation, "Uzbek Central Asia and Mughal India: Asian Muslim Society in the 16th and 17th Centuries," Harvard University 1996.

<sup>27</sup> Mutribi, p. 19.

his book. In a session several weeks later, Jahangir wants to know the annual maintenance of the mausoleum, which Mutribi estimates “informally” at 10,000 rupees. The Emperor then states that, in accordance with his guest’s information, he will send that amount to Samarqand, thereby assuming responsibility for the upkeep of this “Mughal family monument.”<sup>28</sup>

No doubt mindful that Mutribi’s impressions will be reported in Central Asia, Jahangir seems consistently concerned with impressing him. Among the seemingly nonchalant emperor’s tactics are showing the visitor a huge chunk of black gold and casually asking if it is the same material Timur’s sepulchre is made of,<sup>29</sup> demonstrating a novelty mechanical contraption of great complexity,<sup>30</sup> inviting him to witness the lunar weighing ceremony,<sup>31</sup> bringing out the world’s biggest sugar block,<sup>32</sup> and taking him to a nocturnal oryx fight,<sup>33</sup> on each occasion repeating the question, “Have you ever seen anything like this in Turan (Central Asia)?” to which a suitably awestruck Mutribi each time replies that indeed he has not. These exchanges suggest a peculiar Mughal characteristic, something like a subtle longing for acknowledgement from home that the banished son has done surprisingly well for himself in his exile.

Jahangir’s “news from home” queries often concern people assumed to be common acquaintances, such as Mizra Baqi Anjomani, who came to serve Akbar,<sup>34</sup> Abu’l Bey Uzbek, who had come to serve Jahangir,<sup>35</sup> and a number of Central Asian religious leaders. While he gives only token deference to Mutribi’s own religious qualifications – addressing him frequently as “Hey, *Akhund!*” – Jahangir speaks admiringly of several sheikhs of the Dihbidi and Juybari families, maintaining the notion that Mughal rulers considered themselves disciples of Central Asian Naqshbandi sheikhs (except for Akbar, who was a devotee of Mu’in al-Din Chishti).<sup>36</sup>

On another occasion, Jahangir expresses a desire to hear Mutribi sing a Central Asian tune – not a traditional one, though, like the ones he used to hear at family gatherings, but rather “something from the *tasnifs* of Ustad ‘Ali Dust Nami, from the time of ‘Abdullah Khan Uzbek.”<sup>37</sup> Jahangir’s well-known interest in miniature painting also shows up,

<sup>28</sup> Mutribi, p. 69. Earlier, in 1620, Jahangir had sent 10,000 rupees to Samarqand with an embassy led by Mir Baraka; half was to go to Khwaja Salih Dihbidi and half to “the *mujawirs* attached to the tomb of Timur” (*Tuzuk-i Jahangiri*, tr. A. Rogers and H. Beveridge, 2 vols., Calcutta 1909–14, ii, p. 196). It is quite interesting to note that even decades later Emperor Aurangzeb, on hearing from Sayyid Oghlan of the run-down condition of the *Gur-i Amir*, issued a *firman* “on behalf of the souls of the ancestors” for 12 rupees per day (Muhammad Hadi “Maliha” Samarqandi, *Mudhakkir al-Ashab*, Institute of Oriental Studies, Uzbekistan Academy of Sciences ms. no. 4270, f. 297; cited in Roya Marefat, *Beyond the Architecture of Death*, unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Harvard University, 1991, p. 58).

<sup>29</sup> Mutribi, p. 20. Timur’s sepulchre is actually of black jade.

<sup>30</sup> Mutribi, p. 23.

<sup>31</sup> Mutribi, p. 32.

<sup>32</sup> Mutribi, p. 33.

<sup>33</sup> Mutribi, p. 43.

<sup>34</sup> Mutribi, p. 28.

<sup>35</sup> Mutribi, pp. 30–1. Jahangir tries here to trick Mutribi, showing him two men, neither of whom is Abu’l Bey, as Mutribi correctly responds. Jahangir then shows his guest a portrait, which Mutribi recognizes as the true personage.

<sup>36</sup> Mutribi, pp. 33–4; Mutribi says the only person in Central Asia worthy of receiving Jahangir’s giant sugar block, other than Imam Quli Khan, would be Khwaja Hashem Muhammad Dihbidi, to which Jahangir replies that he himself is one of Dihbidi’s followers. Also later on, Jahangir says he will delay his departure for Kashmir until the arrival of ‘Abd al-Rahim Khwaja Juybari at court (p. 45).

<sup>37</sup> Mutribi, p. 50. Mutribi describes Ustad ‘Ali’s style as a blend of Timurid and “Turk” influences.

when he brings out portraits which his artists have done of the Uzbek rulers 'Abdullah Khan and 'Abd al-Mu'min. He asks his Central Asian visitor to tell honestly whether they are accurate likenesses; when Mutribi comments that 'Abdullah was a bit thinner and had a crooked chin, Jahangir calls out the painter on the spot and has him correct the portrait.<sup>38</sup>

What is absent throughout from Jahangir's line of questioning is anything concerning information which could be considered politically relevant or useful. In other words, the Emperor's interest in hearing about Central Asia was entirely sentimental. Thus, one of the most fascinating aspects of Mutribi's memoirs is what they unconsciously reveal about the persisting Mughal attitude toward the Central Asian homeland. Reading between the lines of Mutribi's text suggests that, contrary to the author's attempts to imply that Jahangir greatly admired his skills as a poet,<sup>39</sup> the Emperor mainly enjoyed using him as an informant and a straight man and otherwise held him in no special esteem.<sup>40</sup>

Mutribi's writing offers no indication that he experienced or had any interest in Indian life outside the confines of the royal court. All that his account offers to let the reader know he is in India is the overall sense of grandeur: everything there is bigger, better, more ostentatious. This is certainly the impression Jahangir was striving to instil in his guest, and if the Emperor's aim was to have his wealth and majesty reported and described "back home" then he was certainly successful in this.

Mahmud's youthful adventurousness is quite a contrasting approach. Unlike Mutribi, he seems singularly dedicated to seeing what is most alien and astonishing to him, which equates to Hindu culture in general. He is the sort of traveller who focuses on what is different rather than on what is familiar. Although he does seek out the fellowship of Muslims and takes for granted Islamic charity toward travellers, these things are mentioned only in passing, as if inconsequential and unworthy of comment. Mahmud details Muslim life in India only when it strikes him as odd or anomalous, such as the Muharram activities he observes on arriving at Lahore,<sup>41</sup> or on several occasions when he marvels at the number of Indian Muslims who participate in river bathing rituals together with Hindus.<sup>42</sup> The author's silence regarding the familiar and "home-like" aspects of India is itself a type of subtle evidence illustrating that in his mind, he had not yet crossed beyond the geographical frontier of his native society, the society of Islamic Asia. It was, rather, crossing social borders that interested him.<sup>43</sup>

<sup>38</sup> Mutribi, p. 61.

<sup>39</sup> Mutribi, p. 44; Jahangir recites a couplet and asks Mutribi to reply in matching rhyme and metre (*mojavabe*). When Mutribi does so, a scoffing attendant says the couplet is not Mutribi's, upon which Mutribi spontaneously comes up with three more, silencing the sceptic. But during a later session it is clear Jahangir, who like most rulers also considered himself a poet, has his own criteria for judging good and bad verse. When Mutribi, in accordance with the Emperor's request, recites a couplet by the late Uzbek ruler 'Abdullah Khan, the ever-present scoffing attendant says, "What a stupid couplet!" Jahangir silences him with the words, "If 'Abdullah Khan's couplet is stupid, then you are more stupid," meaning, presumably, that one does not criticise the work of a king (Mutribi, p. 62).

<sup>40</sup> As Mutribi's visit occurred during the final months of the Emperor's life, it is not mentioned in the *Tuzuk-i Jahangiri*.

<sup>41</sup> Mahmud, pp. 9–10. These would most probably have been unfamiliar to him, as Central Asia was overwhelmingly Sunni.

<sup>42</sup> For example at Benares, where he asks them why they are participating in an infidel ritual, to which they respond by raising their hands toward the sky and then pointing to their foreheads – such is their destiny (Mahmud, pp. 21–3).

<sup>43</sup> One imagines that had Mahmud's travels taken him to Ottoman lands, he would have written most extensively about churches, Easter, and Greek or Armenian women.

After bathing ghats, Mahmud is perhaps most fascinated by Hindu temples and what goes on in them, amazed and often overwhelmed by the sheer numbers of thronging people. He seems simultaneously thrilled and oppressed, concluding one account with the words, “I almost passed out . . . so I left town and headed onward . . .”<sup>44</sup> The crowds are omnipresent in secular as in religious pursuits, as at Patna where the author hears of “an incomparably beautiful woman” who is known to bathe in the river at a certain hour of the day. Mahmud seeks out this spectacle and finds such a large audience assembled that he can only squeeze himself in on a rooftop. Upon the woman’s appearance the crowd goes wild and Mahmud waxes lyrical describing her beauty, until finally he sobers up and, realizing she is out of his reach, he gets up and leaves.<sup>45</sup>

Mahmud recounts many instances of his “going native” amongst the Hindus – a thing his readers in Bukhara province, a region known for orthodox Muslim piety, would surely have found distasteful, just as proper London society did regarding similarly adaptable Englishmen in colonial times.<sup>46</sup> Mahmud is not too proud to accept the charity of Hindus, or to follow their examples. In Bengal, at the temple of Medinapur where 50,000 pilgrims have gathered and “women and men mix together, their bodies naked, chanting *Hari*,” (a name of Vishnu) Mahmud takes off his turban and his shoes and chants *Hari* right along with them, displaying an almost Burtonesque religious flexibility.<sup>47</sup>

India seems to represent to Mahmud a whole spectrum of oddities, ranging from the merely curious to the horrific, which elicit a corresponding array of responses within him. While he finds the crowds and chants exotic, and other spectacles humorous – such as the grinning one-legged aborigine who hops three *dhar*’ at a step and is amazed that other men walk on two feet<sup>48</sup> – other phenomena prove too much for him to handle.

One such instance occurs in Allahabad. Mahmud, aghast at the way the merchants and the wealthy are throwing rupees by the thousands into the river, remarks on the foolishness of the practice to a Hindu acquaintance, who replies “with flames of anger bursting from his mouth” that it is eternity and not money that a Hindu values, and to prove his point goes up to an attendant priest whom he has slice him in two with a sword as a sacrifice before the astonished traveller’s eyes.<sup>49</sup> The author cites other instances of grisly suicide, such as a Hindu woman warrior captured in battle who, being refused her request for death, rips out her own tongue and dies.<sup>50</sup>

On another occasion, while seeking shelter in the woods during a severe thunderstorm one night near the Bengal town of Davnapur, Mahmud is beckoned by a voice calling his name. Thinking someone is offering him a place to stay, he approaches, and sees an inhumanly hairy figure standing in a pool, eating the raw liver of a man Mahmud

<sup>44</sup> At Lale bar Sang temple in Benares, where the author found himself lost in a crowd of 30,000 chanting worshippers (Mahmud, p. 23).

<sup>45</sup> Mahmud, p. 25.

<sup>46</sup> Mahmud does, however, mention at least one instance where he claims to have converted a Hindu friend to Islam (Mahmud, pp. 81–2).

<sup>47</sup> Mahmud, pp. 33–4.

<sup>48</sup> Mahmud, p. 32. The aborigine had been captured from Zirbad and was being taken away as a gift for the Mughal Emperor. A *dhar*’ is equal to 41 inches.

<sup>49</sup> Mahmud, p. 22.

<sup>50</sup> Mahmud, p. 80.

recognizes as one of his travelling companions.<sup>51</sup> When he relates this episode in town the following day the response is matter-of-fact: the cannibal somehow calls everyone by name. Mahmud has more to say about the sect of so-called “liver-eaters” (*jigar khwar*) of Bengal and Orissa later on, including one instance of a nine-year old girl who is turned in by her own parents to the Mughal governor for justice.<sup>52</sup>

The Central Asian traveller displays an equal amazement at India’s natural world, from his descriptions of the destructive power of cyclones<sup>53</sup> to his impressions of the animal kingdom, which range from whimsical to terrifying. En route to Rajmahal Mahmud visits a river port known informally as “Monkeytown,” where he estimates at five to six thousand the monkeys surrounding the boats to beg for food. The biggest ape watches from a distance, and settles disputes between his clamouring fellows by pointing a finger at them. The sailors all call him “The Monkey King.”<sup>54</sup> At another point Mahmud describes two highly intelligent apes in an Orissa town who were used to find thieves. Names would be written on scraps of paper, from which the apes would determine the guilty party, although occasionally disagreeing between themselves on the verdict.<sup>55</sup>

Mahmud encounters herds of wild buffalo, which he also estimates at no less than five thousand – seemingly his figure of choice. He reports seeing a companion shoot one bull twenty-five times, but the indestructible beast simply runs off. Only the night before Mahmud has had the fright of his life sleeping near a Bengal swamp, where he was awakened by the rustling of a crocodile which snatched one of his companions and dragged him to a watery death. The locals say there have already been twenty-four such victims, but all attempts to catch the crocodile have been in vain.<sup>56</sup> On Ceylon Mahmud makes a reference, seemingly fantastic, to a lion-like beast which shoots a stream of fatal “urine” at its prey.<sup>57</sup>

Mahmud’s vagabond mode of adventure-travel seems to have been no less common in the seventeenth century than the conservative, fortune-hunting style favoured by the likes of Mutribi. In a *khanqah* at the port of Raj Mahal Mahmud mentions meeting an assortment of travellers like himself, who have come from all over – from his native Balkh, as well as from Bukhara, Khorasan, ‘Iraq (Western Persia), Baghdad, Turkey and Syria. Many of them are raving about southern India, particularly Ceylon, so that Mahmud decides to head in that direction next.<sup>58</sup> This passage is especially significant in that it shows Mahmud to be

<sup>51</sup> Mahmud, p. 29. The scene recalls paintings representing Kali, the Hindu goddess of destruction, who is often portrayed surrounded by human bones and munching body parts.

<sup>52</sup> Mahmud, p. 84. The methods described by Mahmud for determining a true *jigar khwar* from an innocent are reminiscent of European witch tests: one can either rub pepper in the suspect’s eyes to see if it irritates them, or dunk him by the legs into a body of water to see if he floats (Mahmud, pp. 86–7).

<sup>53</sup> For example, his shipwreck (Mahmud, p. 63), or when he describes an entire garden of tall trees being completely flattened (pp. 78–9).

<sup>54</sup> Mahmud, p. 28.

<sup>55</sup> Mahmud, pp. 79–80. Baqir Khan, the Mughal governor of Orissa whom Mahmud served for three years, sent these apes as a gift to Jahangir, but Shah Jahan acceded to the throne in the meanwhile and sent the apes back as worthless. This was probably meant as a snub to Baqir Khan, who had supported Jahangir during Shah Jahan’s rebellion.

<sup>56</sup> Mahmud, pp. 30–1.

<sup>57</sup> Mahmud, p. 56.

<sup>58</sup> Mahmud, p. 25. One encounters a similar atmosphere in today’s youth hostels, where young, shoestring-budget travellers from all over the world meet and swap stories about the “best places” to go, often getting inspired to visit locations they had not thought of before.

not a unique case but rather a *type* of traveller, by no means unusual at the time, which India attracted from every corner of the Muslim world.

After witnessing the beginning of the Jagannath festival, where he is awed by the immensity of the idol and its chariot and flabbergasted by the number of “pious suicides” either jumping off the rolling statue or throwing themselves under the chariot’s massive wheels,<sup>59</sup> Mahmud heads southwards beyond Mughal territory. He meets Europeans – probably French – at Conakry,<sup>60</sup> then visits the Deccani towns of Golconda and Bijapur<sup>61</sup> before continuing on to Ceylon, which he likens to the promised Paradise.<sup>62</sup> He is particularly enthralled by an island of Ceylonese “virgins,” whose virginity, no matter how passionately one makes love to them, is miraculously restored after every encounter.<sup>63</sup>

Returning northward on a European ship Mahmud is shipwrecked,<sup>64</sup> and coming ashore in Orissa the passengers are arrested by Mughal officials. The Europeans tell Mahmud that under such conditions the local governor is permitted to take possession of the ship and its valuables and enslave its passengers, but they are unable to flee. The attempts of one European passenger to save Mahmud from their captors by telling them he is a scholar and a poet backfires, since the Mughals then assume Mahmud is a European priest, and they whip and mistreat him all the more harshly, making him walk barefoot through a thistle-covered forest bed. The captives are taken to the seat of the Mughal governor, Baqir Khan, at Cuttack. As it is three days before the Persian New Year, Mahmud quickly composes an elegy to springtime which he presents when called before the governor. Noticing the Arabic in Mahmud’s preface, Baqir Khan calls the wandering Central Asian into a private audience, after which he gives him over to his brother Mirza Hosseini with whom Mahmud becomes fast friends. Mahmud is provided with a house and servants, and asked to work translating Arabic into Persian for the governor.<sup>65</sup> Eventually a local holy man by the name of Shah Azmat makes it known to Baqir Khan that he wishes to give his daughter in marriage to Mahmud, who accepts the offer.<sup>66</sup>

Mahmud remains in Mughal service for three years, during which he composes a 6,000 couplet work titled *Akhlaq-i Husayni*. In 1037/1628 shortly after Shah Jahan’s accession he is invited with Baqir Khan to the imperial court at Agra – under greatly changed circumstances, it may be remarked, from those of his first visit to that city.<sup>67</sup> After three years of marriage Mahmud’s wife suddenly dies at Agra, and he decides to return home to Balkh.

On his return trip to Central Asia Mahmud becomes embroiled in a dispute between the then Safavid governor of Qandahar, ‘Ali Mardan Khan, and a local Afghan chieftain named

<sup>59</sup> Mahmud, p. 37.

<sup>60</sup> Mahmud, p. 39.

<sup>61</sup> Mahmud, pp. 40–3.

<sup>62</sup> Mahmud, p. 54. The local governor has temporarily forbidden pilgrimages to Adam’s Peak, because of the skunk-lion mentioned above.

<sup>63</sup> Mahmud, p. 61. Strangely, this miracle ceases to occur if the girls should leave their native island.

<sup>64</sup> Mahmud, p. 63.

<sup>65</sup> Mahmud, pp. 65–8. He is assisted in this task by one of his servants, an elderly man who turns out to be a scholar fallen on hard times.

<sup>66</sup> Mahmud, p. 74.

<sup>67</sup> Iuri Bregel, *Persidskaya Literatura*, ii (Moscow, 1972), p. 1136. Ansar Khan points out that Baqir Khan, having supported Jahangir during Shah Jahan’s rebellion, “must have been anxious to ingratiate himself with the new emperor.” Ansar Z. Khan, “Mahmud b. Amir Vali’s description of towns, and cities and regions of South Asia in the Bahr al-Asrar,” *Journal of the Pakistan Historical Society*, XXXVIII/2 (1990), p. 137). It appears the governor was ultimately successful in doing so.

Sher Khan, and is taken to Herat to testify before the Persian authorities.<sup>68</sup> He finally makes his way home to Balkh, however, and eventually becomes librarian for Nazr Muhammad Khan.

Did Mutribi and Mahmud think of India as “abroad”? The question is not a simple one. Ignorance of language and custom plays a large part in making people feel “foreign” in a place they are visiting. Conversely, Central Asian travellers to Mughal India in the seventeenth century would have felt to some degree “at home” in that Muslim-ruled land where, just as in Central Asia, the call to prayer was heard five times a day, Persian was everywhere understood, Hafez was recited and pilaf was served. Yet, like twentieth-century Midwesterners visiting New York City, they might also have been daunted by the diversity of the place, at times puzzled by what their co-religionaries found acceptable, often overwhelmed by the scale of things and occasionally shocked and appalled by what they saw.

Furthermore, people travel for different reasons and see things through different lenses. Some, like Mutribi, have specific material aims in mind and are more or less blind to everything else. Others, like Mahmud, shun what is familiar and seek out the exotic wherever they may be. What a comparison of the two types shows, is that for Central Asians in the seventeenth century India loomed as the most obvious repository of potential experience and opportunity across the entire spectrum of desirable possibilities.

Mutribi and Mahmud both returned from India to their Central Asian home. Meanwhile scores of their most illustrious compatriots – and hundreds or perhaps thousands of their more anonymous ones – came to India and stayed.<sup>69</sup> The attraction India exerted on the minds of seventeenth-century Central Asians is evident. It is equally evident that to go there posed a Central Asian no great difficulty, and that Mughal society was one in which a Central Asian could function effectively and live comfortably as a Muslim. A comparison of Mahmud’s and Mutribi’s very different contemporaneous accounts suggests that the world as perceived by Asian Muslims of their time was defined more by cultural boundaries than by the politics of imperial states.

### **Acknowledgement**

I would like to thank Roy Mottahedeh and Riazul Islam for kindly reviewing this manuscript, and for several helpful comments.

<sup>68</sup> Mahmud, pp. 100–3.

<sup>69</sup> My Ph.D. dissertation discusses the cases of a number of Central Asian migrants and visitors to Mughal India from all walks of life, in addition to the factors surrounding such movement.