

Religious Narratives of Persian Travelers

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Abstract: Persians have travelled far and wide but only those travel writings which have been in Arabic are known and mentioned. In this paper fourteen itineraries by Persian writers are discussed. These itineraries are written in Persian and range from Nasir Khosrow's *Itinerary* of 1046 – 1052 to Mehdi Qoli Hedayat's *Mecca Itinerary* of 1903. A short biography of each writer and the reason for the travel are presented. The content of these books is classified into five categories of administration, economics, socio-demographics, environment, and women. It is argued that itineraries play a dual role of showing both the observer and the observed; these writers present a dichotomy regarding the Arabs and the lands they visited. On the one hand, they were fascinated by the dignity of the Bedouins and on the other, they abhorred the way of life and their behaviours. There is a kind of disappointment in the reaction of these writers which might be due to the utopian outlook at religious places and the lack of mythical opulence of Abbasid caliphs. It can also be considered as the reaction of a bygone empire to its occupiers.

Keywords: Islamic religious cities, Religious itineraries, Persian travelers, Nasir Khosrow.

INTRODUCTION

With the expansion of Islam in the eighth century AD, great changes appeared. One of the outcomes was the establishment of geography as a science and its rapid development. It emerged from the necessity of Muslims to map the newly-conquered distant lands. As a result, from the third century AH/tenth century AD, geography, founded with Khawrazmi's *Surat al-Arz*, was further developed in books such as *al-Masaalik wa al-Mamaalik* and *al-Boldan*, and with the help of geographers such as Ibn-Khordadbeh and Bilazari. At around the same time, itineraries, or travelogues, also appeared, chronicling the first hand experiences of brave adventurers. One such example is Abu Dolaf in the fourth/eleventh century whose travels to Central Asia, China, India and Iran were written in two volumes. Abu Zaid Seerafi's *Silsilat al-Ta-warikh*, a description of sea voyages in the fifth/twelfth century, is another example of such works. These books offer some unexpected and valuable historical information such as Egypt's prosperity and security in the fifth/twelfth century, or the interesting and innovative use of credit cards in the bazaars of Basra.

Most of the itineraries and geography books that Persians produced were in

Arabic; those written in Persian are unique in what they present to the modern reader. One good example is the itinerary of Nasir Khosrow in which he describes the inner locales of the Arabian Peninsula, characterizes the Bedouin lifestyle, and shows how the inhabitants of this area earned their living. Persians considered Hijaz (the high western edge of the Arabian Peninsula), Yemen and Iraq as the original land of Arabs; other places were called Arabic-speaking lands. Nasir Khosrow gave a detailed description of the area mentioning that Yemen (called Hemyar) and Hijaz were the land of Arabs, which were enclosed on three sides by the sea: 'The length of this island, consisting of Yemen and Hijaz, and, stretching from Kufa to Eden, is 500 farsang [leagues] from north to south, and its width stretching from Oman to Jaar is 400 farsang. And the land of Arabs is from Kufa to Medina and the land of Hemyar is from Makka to Eden' (Nasir Khosrow, 1977).

The Arabs were perceived as the chosen race because the Qur'an was written in the tongue of these people. Based on the volubility of the tongue and its eloquence, they were believed to precede other nations; and because the prophet, Mohammed, was appointed from among these people, they were said to be the chosen children of Adam (Nasir Khosrow, 1977). Persians travelled to Arab countries mostly for pilgrimage. Performing the Hajj ritual during this pilgrimage was undertaken for several reasons: as a cover to escape a king's disfavor, a means of personal exile, in order to gain respect by pretending to observe religious obligations, or sometimes, even, to engage in spying missions. For example, Aminodolleh's dismissal from his ministerial post by the Qajar king smelled of foul play; as a result, (Aminodolleh, 1975) accepted his brother's suggestion to go on the Hajj pilgrimage to save his life.

Two regional centres were always the focus of attention for Persian travellers. The first one was the region now known as Iraq and the pilgrimage to the tombs of Shi'i *imams* in Kerbala, Najaf and other cities, which are collectively called *atabaat*. Pilgrims would cross over to Khaneqein from the western borders of Persia and go by land until they reached the Tigris River. They would continue by land or water. The second centre consisted of Damascus and Hijaz. Pilgrims to Makkah usually started their voyage from Tehran going to the North of Persia and crossing some parts of Russia. They entered Asia Minor and Ottoman Istanbul (Constantinople). Then they either took a sea voyage directly to Jeddah or went via Alexandria in Egypt, reaching Jeddah through the Red Sea. Farahani, one of these Persian travelers, described two classes of travel to Makkah and Madinah: the cheap and the expensive. The former started on the 25th of Ramadan in Anzali (a port on the Caspian Sea) by ship, taking three days to reach Istanbul on the fifth of Shawal. After a ten-day stop, Farahani advised the prospective traveller to take a boat to Yanbu, a twelve-day voyage, and to continue on a six-day journey from there with camels and *shaqdaf* (a kind of litter) to reach Madinah. He advised the traveller to stay in Madinah until the 25th of Dhu al-Qadah and then to accompany the pilgrims from Damascus to enter Makkah on the sixth or seventh of Dhu al-Hijja. His suggestion for the pilgrim who wanted to visit places other than Makkah and Madinah was to take the boat from Istanbul to Alexandria, visit Beirut and Damascus, and then to come to Jeddah and Taif in Najd before entering Makkah.

In ancient times, travelers went on foot or by camel, particularly in Arabia, although later on, the rich used different kinds of coaches and carriages. Nasir Khosrow writes, 'From Jerusalem I accompanied a group of people who were going to Hijaz on foot. Our guide was agile and a good walker' (Nasir Khosrow, 1977). However, as another traveler remarked, riding camels was not easy for Persians 'who have never been on a camel, let alone a camel without a bridle and saddle and they would fall down'

(Nayebolayaleh, 1994). Mehdi Qoli Hedayat reported that a caravan usually had a very elaborate arrangement:

Six riders moved ahead of the caravan as the guide. Fifty on dromedaries followed the caravan who would beat on drums at the start of the journey so no pilgrim would be left behind. There were three thousand camels in the caravan which moved in two rows of two camels on each side with ten zar' [each zar' is 104 centimeters] space between them. This distance was never changed. Lanterns were hung from the carriages and camel riders would sometimes sing, their voices mixing with camel bells producing such a pleasant atmosphere on moonlit nights that I have not witnessed anywhere (Hedayat, 1981).

The caravans were very large so that sometimes it took an hour and a half to go from the beginning to the end of the caravan. In later times, Baghdad could be reached from Kazemain in forty-five minutes by means of a large public carriage drawn by two horses on a rail, which could carry fifty or more pilgrims (Peerzadeh, 1964). Farahani also mentioned a railway system, which operated from Alexandria to the Suez Seaport (Farahani, 1963). Many other travelers described sea voyages also in minute detail, and mentioned that the vessels used varied from rafts made of inflated skins to luxury steamships (Farahani, 1963) and (Hedayat, 1981) and (Nayebolsadr Shirazi, 1977). Reference has been made to a number of itineraries, but except for Nasir Khosrow's itinerary, none of the others seems to have been translated from Persian into any other language. The itineraries chronicle the travels of Nasir Khosrow; Nasirredin Shah (the Qajar king), a few princes and courtiers, and Nayebolsadr Shirazi, a mystic from a clerical family. These travelogues refer to a time before the end of the nineteenth century, that is, before oil exploration started in the region. Although the itineraries start from the fifth / twelfth century, there is a gap of almost eight centuries during which no itinerary of importance on Arab countries is written in Persian. Political and social disturbances after the Mongol period might be one of the most important reasons for this; but also, during the calmer Safavid period (1502-1736 AD), no journey of importance took place. The reason might be the long enmity and war between the Shi'i government and the Ottoman Empire, making the crossing to Makkah more difficult for Persians. Another point is that history as a discipline was preferred over geography from the Mongol period onward. Interestingly enough, in this period there is a wealth of itineraries from European visitors on their tours of the Orient who went to Persia and visited Esfahan, the capital of the Safavid rulers.

The itineraries used in this paper consist of:

1. Nasir Khosrow's Itinerary; voyage beginning in 437 AH with the aim of pilgrimage to Makkah passing through Egypt and North Africa.

2. *Riyaz al-Siyahe* by Shirvani, Haji Zein al-Abedin, voyage beginning in 1211 AH with the aim of an 18-year travel.

3. Mirza Abu Taleb Khan, *Maseer Talebi* or *The Itinerary of Miraza Abu Talib Khan*, voyage beginning in 1219 AH; he was an Iranian living in India and intended to introduce Europeans to Iranians. He visited Iraq.

4. *Itinerary* by Reza Qoli Mirza Nayebolayaleh, a grandchild of Fat'h Ali, a Qajar king, voyage beginning in 1250 AH. His aim was to escape to Europe due to political

reasons and he passed through Iraq.

5. *Itinerary* by Abdolalikhan Adeebolmolk, voyage beginning in 1273 AH. He was a courtier.

6. *Makkah Itinerary* by Soltan Mohammad Seifoldolleh, voyage beginning in 1279 AH. He was a Qajar prince and brother to a minister.

7. *Itinerary* by Miraza Khanlarkhan Etesamolmolk, voyage beginning in 1285 AH. He was the secretary to the ministry of foreign affairs and his aim was to present a report to and make arrangements for Nasirredin Shah who intended to go to Makka.

8. *Itinerary to Kerbala and Najaf* by Nasirredin Shah, the Qajar king, voyage beginning in 1287 AH.

9. *Itinerary* by Mirza Hossein Farahani, voyage beginning in 1302 AH. He seems to be quite well-versed in international affairs but his position at the court is ambiguous.

10. *From Sanctuary to Shrine* by Abolhasan Khan Fakhrolmolk, voyage beginning in 1304 AH. He was a courtier and wrote the itinerary at the command of the Qajar king.

11. *Itinerary* by Mohammad Ma'sum Nayebolsadr Shirazi, voyage beginning in 1305 AH. He traveled to India and Makka. He came from a religious family and had mystic tendencies.

12. *Itinerary* by Haji Hasan Peerzadeh, voyage beginning in 1305 AH. He was a courtier.

13. *Itinerary* by Haji Mirza Alikhan Aminodolleh, voyage beginning in 1315 AH. He was a reformist minister at the Qajar court who on the way to exile went on a pilgrimage.

14. *Mecca Itinerary* by Mehdi Qoli Hedayat, voyage beginning in 1321 AH. He was a famous writer and courtier who accompanied the discharged minister, Aminosoltan, on a pilgrimage.

The writers of these Persian itineraries were from the upper classes, mostly courtiers with a good education. Some knew several European languages and were familiar with international politics. They did not spend their time in common inns or caravansaries; they mostly met with rulers and rarely did any trading themselves. In spite of this, most of their writings on the general condition of each place they saw pointed to similar social conditions: poverty, destitution, ignorance and thieving.

An analytical study of Persian itineraries has not been done yet and they deserve to be investigated in detail. This research has revealed a wealth of sociological, social, political, and anthropological material. In order to tabulate all this information, details have been categorized according to the following headings and sub-headings:

- ✓ Administration
- ✓ Economics: (agriculture, industry, pilgrimage-related occupations, slavery, begging); Bedouin activities (camel riding and camel ownership, collecting tribute and taxes, intimidation, banditry, and highway robbery)
- ✓ Socio-demographics: housing and architecture, arts and culture (music, books and libraries), physical appearance and dress, food and sanitation
- ✓ Environment: animals and plants
- ✓ Women (make-up, jewelery, clothes, and occupations)

ADMINISTRATION

Nasir Khosrow has given a detailed description of Makkah ruled by an emir who has influence over the emirs of Jeddah and Madinah, and whose post lasts a lifetime. Other parts of Arabia did not seem to follow any political system. Makkah also had another important person called a *sharif*, who is responsible for pilgrimage. The same system has been described by later writers with the difference that the Ottoman Empire appointed each official except the *sharif*. The same has been said about Iraq with the added administrative detail of its having a better army. Yet it seems that the Ottomans had difficulty in controlling the Arab population and had to build many military bases along their borders to ensure the safety of pilgrims. Peerzadeh has written: 'On the first Iraqi border post, travellers from Damascus to Baghdad could see a barrack, a hospital, and a national park and at all times four hundred soldiers on foot and four hundred soldiers on horseback, twenty gunners and ten-gun carriages are present'. Most of the reports have pointed to the injustice and cruelty of the rulers who themselves colluded in robbing the pilgrims. Fakhrolmolk noted that the Ottomans were very happy that pilgrims lost everything to the thieves (Fakhrolmolk, 1993). Only Nasir Khosrow's report from a city called Lahsaa is unique in describing a just ruler.

ECONOMIC SYSTEM

Agriculture, industry, pilgrimage-related occupations, begging and slavery

Agriculture

A comparison between Nasir Khosrow's itinerary and those written about eight centuries later showed little development in the economy of Arabia. Agriculture was the basis of the economy in ancient times, and on the peninsula, it was very limited. Palm plantations have been mentioned frequently by all the writers of itineraries. (Nasir Khosrow, 1977) has also written of grapes and melons in Makkah, as well as pomegranate and fig trees in Taif. (Nayebolsadr Shirazi, 1977) and a few others described the irrigation system where water was drawn by horses and distributed.

Industry

There is no mention of handicrafts, workshops or factories. There is a reference to a kind of plant that was cultivated and its flowers were used for dyes (Peerzadeh, 1964). Peerzadeh has also written of a common soda plant which was gathered to produce alkali. He has also mentioned a date-packing factory in Basra, the products of which were very expensive.

Pilgrim-related occupations

All religious cities relied on pilgrims to support their economy. Most occupations described by the writers consisted of owning boats, transporting passengers, carrying water and renting houses. Farahani has reported that there were thirty pilgrim leaders who followed their ancestors' occupations; they sent representatives abroad to invite people to Makkah. These people wielded a great deal of power. The pilgrim leader, who gained a large proportion of the trade, supervised even the buying of gifts and souvenirs (Farahani, 1963).

Begging and slavery

Aminodolleh mentioned that Blacks and Arabs rarely begged. Women and children have been described as singing and asking for alms. Slavery was another source of income and many Persian travelers went to slave bazaars to observe the sale of slaves. (Aminodolleh, 1975) has described a slave bazaar and the sorting and selling of male and female slaves as well as eunuchs, young and old.

Bedouin Occupations: camel riding and camel ownership, collecting tribute and taxes, banditry and highway robbery

Besides camel riding, camel renting and guiding the pilgrims (an inherited job), another source of income was through imposition of road tolls on the pilgrims, which often led to confrontations. (Nasir Khosrow, 1977) has reported that one such skirmish resulted in two thousand pilgrims being killed. Eight centuries later, (Aminodolleh, 1975) described a similar scene in which canons were used and many were injured or killed. Highway robbery and banditry were also recorded as taking place not only in Arabia, but also in Iraq; groups of two hundred or more robbers roamed Iraq thinking their actions officially sanctioned. Almost all travelers have mentioned that the rulers of the area shared in the loot. Even Nasirredin Shah's royal tent was not immune from thieves.

SOCIO-DEMOGRAPHY: HOUSING AND ARCHITECTURE, ARTS AND CULTURE (MUSIC, BOOKS AND LIBRARIES), PHYSICAL APPEARANCE AND DRESS, SANITATION, FOOD

Housing and Architecture

Makkah is the most important religious city for Muslims and its most significant section is Masjid al-Haram and the Ka'aba. Nasir Khosrow described every single detail of the mosque, such as its eighteen doors and the names of the bazaars that surrounded it. He has also described the teak door of the Ka'aba as having two parts; the building itself was draped with a white cloth, while the windows permitted light inside. Eight centuries later, (Farahani, 1963) gave a description of the black stone flooring of the mosque as well as the streets. The door of the Ka'aba were of gold and he found the black stone used inside awesome. He has also reported that Makkah had about four thousand excellent three-storey houses, all made of stone and wood, some of them with baths. While Madinah did have three-storey houses, the town was not as prosperous as (Seifoldolleh et al., 1985) and (Peerzadeh, 1964). noted that all the cities, villages and oases of Iraq were in ruins, and that poverty was present everywhere. As most of the writers of itineraries were shocked to see these cities in such a condition, their idealistic expectation of the wealth and splendor of ancient kings and caliphs was shattered.

Arts and Culture: music, books and libraries

There is music on *Eid al-Adha*; (Farahani, 1963) has reported that every day before sunset a group of musicians performed on the street leading to the *sharif's* house. Three hours later they played in front of the *Pasha's* house. Many travellers have written of music played by ordinary people at home and in teahouses. (Aminodolleh, 1975) mentioned a group called *Mogharebah* who played their own mystical music, and (Fakhrolmolk, 1993), on the road to Kazemain, wrote of people gathering in a teahouse

and playing music. Nasir Khosrow, who as a scholar was interested in books, has made no mention of either books or libraries. However, he has reported that at one time when he was short of money, he had a basket of books to sell, but no buyers, and he described the locals as 'hungry, naked and ignorant people'. Yet the same people were charmed by the few lines of calligraphy he drew on the wall of the mosque and they offered him dates in exchange for decorating the pulpit of their mosque. Apart from this, (Aminodolleh, 1975) is the only Qajar writer who has mentioned bookshops in Makkah, in one of which he had made a purchase.

Physical Appearance and Dress

In the Persian itineraries, Bedouin people have been reported as living very frugally and dressing very simply. Persians travellers were very much drawn to the dignity and simplicity, and frankness of the Bedouins who were usually dressed in dusty cotton clothing. The shining eyes and the eyebrows of Arabs were always described as their best features. Beards were sparse and high cheekbones were common. Most carried a sword. A shaikh's clothing was naturally of better quality (Aminodolleh, 1975).

Sanitation

(Nayebolsadr Shirazi, 1977) considered getting a health certificate as one of the most difficult and unpleasant parts of a journey, because there was often only one doctor while there were thousands of travelers who had to wait for long hours under the sun. On the other hand, (Farahani, 1963) has mentioned that quarantine was simply a matter of paying money. The diseases referred to have been described in relation to the pilgrims in Makkah. Farahani stated that abu rikaab (travelers' fever) occurred due to the heat and the fever lasted three or four days. (Shirvani Zein, 1960) mentioned that with the flooding of the river a kind of fever called ma'aal-moh was spread in Basra. (Adeebolmolk, 1985) has also remarked on another kind of fever which emerged at intervals in Madinah. As for therapies, (Peerzadeh, 1964) described the natural springs of Hammam Abu al-Riyaah in Iraq which soothed certain sicknesses. However, there is hardly any report on traditional or modern medicines. (Nayebolsadr Shirazi, 1977) described the cities of Iraq as being old and dilapidated with dirty streets and much dust and pollution. The shores of the Euphrates were described as being much polluted since there were no sanitary systems in the houses.

Food

Apparently, Persian travelers prepared their own meals, as there is little mention of native food. The food of Arabs was said to be very simple: mostly barley bread, dates, cheese or milk; yet they were very generous and hospitable. The rulers provided lavish feasts consisting of European and native dishes. A few writers have mentioned the availability of alcoholic beverages, and bars seem to have existed in (Hedayat, 1981) and (Seifoldolleh et al., 1985).

ENVIRONMENT: ANIMALS AND PLANTS

Nasirredin Shah and Abolhasan Khan Fakhrolmolk have given much information about birds and animals, no doubt because they were hunters and liked game. They have named ducks, geese, pelicans, and partridges as well as foxes, boars, rabbits and deer. The

flora of these places have also been described in detail, especially a kind of thorn, which was generally presented negatively in Persian literature, and the travellers were therefore surprised by the beauty of its flower (Estakhari, 1986). (Aminodolleh, 1975) believed that the desert between Jeddah and Makkah must have been a jungle in ancient times.

WOMEN: MAKE-UP, JEWELRY, CLOTHES, AND OCCUPATIONS

Interestingly enough, there is not much about women in these itineraries; even those writers who have mentioned a crack in a wall, the hue of a flower, or the special look in a peddler's eyes have not mentioned much about women. (Nayebolsadr Shirazi, 1977) recorded that there were very few women among those who had come to see him. However, from the descriptions he has given, it appears that rural women were less confined than women in the city. Some of these rural women sold bread, chickens and hand-made artifacts (Peerzadeh, 1964). Most rural women had faces, hands and feet covered in tattoos. Sometimes the whole face was described as being covered with green and blue tattoos (Peerzadeh, 1964). Some writers have looked upon the scarifications on the faces of women with great distaste (Farahani, 1963). The clothes of these women were not much different from men and they mostly wore the loose cotton dress of the Arabs (Peerzadeh, 1964). Several cases of aggression leading to death are reported in Iraq in which one woman was knifed by her husband and, in another, shot dead with a pistol (Mirza, 1974). From these few descriptions, one assumes that women were present in the society, but that the writers did not find it appropriate to write much about them.

SUMMARY

Itineraries are important documents because they help to uncover economic, political and cultural conditions of the past. They are also representative of the writers' attitudes; thus, they play a dual role of showing both the observer and the observed. This is particularly so with the itineraries written by Persian travelers. Persian writers face a dilemma regarding the Arabs: on the one hand, they are very much drawn to and fascinated by the dignity of the Bedouins. They believe that since the language of the Qur'an is Arabic, it must be the best of languages. They consider the Arabs to be a chosen people because the Prophet was one of them. On the other hand, they call them thieves and ignorant people to be looked down on. The words of (Shirvani Zein, 1960) best present this duality: 'Verily the Arab tribes are described as brave, generous and wise and are famous for their support, ardor and feasts; but the ignorant and the uneducated are after trickery, hypocrisy, cruelty and corruption, and indeed very greedy. That is why they insist upon highway robbery and thieving' Shirvani Zein. There is a kind of disappointment in the reaction of these writers which might be due to the utopian outlook at the religious places and the lack of mythical opulence of Abbasid caliphs.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would also like to express my gratitude to Professor Farideh Pourgive (English Literature Dept., Shiraz University, Shiraz, Iran) for her willingness to give her time so generously and for her valuable comments and constructive suggestions on an earlier version of the article.

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