

## Indo-Iran Relations through Shahnameh

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It has rightly been said that India and Iran enjoyed friendly relations from time immemorial. Shahnameh (King Book or Book of Kings) of Firdausi (d. 416 /11025-25) the national book of the Iranians, is a testimony to it. Actually speaking, the voluminous Shahnameh is the only ancient detailed and illustrative account available at present about the Indo-Iran relations in different fields, particularly in cultural sphere.

Shahnameh, it should be pointed out at the outset, is not pure history. History writing, as is well known, is an art of comparatively recent origin. It has its own prescribed criterion. Since Shahnameh does not strictly fulfill this criterion, so it is regarded as an admixture of history, as it was known at that time, mythology, folk lore and traditions. At present the authenticity or otherwise of its contents, is not to be investigated. An attempt is being made to summarise what Firdausi has said about India on the basis of the established socio-cultural traditions prevalent among the Iranians of his time i.e. 10<sup>th</sup> century A. D. Most of the material presented by Firdausi, almost one thousand years ago in his Shahnameh, was as Firdausi puts it, preserved in the minds of Dehqans (elders, scholars,) who used to narrate it to the people. A part of it was also recorded in sources in Pahlavi language. On the basis of these records and traditions, the following works similar to Shahnameh, were produced before it, which are supposed to be among the sources of Firdausi:

1. Shahnameh or better known as Shahnameh-e- Bozorg by Abul Moua'id Balkhi.
2. Shahnameh by Abu Ali Mohammad bin Ahmad Balkhi.
3. Shahnameh-e-Abu Mansur in prose
4. Gashtasp Nameh by Daqiqi in verse form which was included by Firdausi in his Shahnameh.

Firdausi has further developed these already existing ancient traditions and narrated them in inimitable style, vigorous expression and beautiful Persian language.

Firdausi has referred to a number of countries and people in Shahnameh which had contacts with Iran in one way or the other, since ancient times. Egypt, Byzantine, Turan,

China, Kabul, India etc. are among those countries which were in perpetual contact with Iran through the ages. It is, however, to be noted that Firdausi has described more about India, its so called political and socio-cultural history than any other country referred to in Shahnameh. It again shows that the Iranian knew India and its people more than any other country.

It is gleaned from Shahnameh that the Indian sub-continent was a prosperous region. It was politically and culturally a force to reckon with. It was divided into various parts ruled by a number of monarchs of different dynasties. Kannauj, Kashmir, Sindh were important centres of political power. Among them, Kannauj was more powerful politically and culturally. Almost all of these rulers were in constant touch with the Iranian or Turanian establishments. Battles were fought; envoys were exchanged; trade was taking place between the two countries, games were exchanged, religious debates took place, offerings from both sides at court level were made, marriages between the royal families were solemnised, scholars, artists and artisans were exchanged; Indian philosophers particularly Brahmins were respected by Iranians for their immense scholarship. Indian astronomers and astrologers were in great demand in Iran particularly among the ruling class; Indian and Iranian rulers and their officers visited each other's country; swords, incense, and bells were among the Indian products generally used by the Iranians.

The following is a brief account of all these activities as described in Shahnameh:<sup>1</sup>

Siyaush son of Kaikaus of Kayani dynasty of Iran once led his army in battle against Afrasiyab, the Turanian king. In this battle troops from Hind (India) reinforced the army of Siyaush.

Peeran, the wise Sipehsalar of Afrasiyab, was sent to India to extract tribute from India where he also fought a war. When Siyaush was executed, Rustam, for taking revenge of this unfortunate incident, mobilised his army which included soldiers from Kashmir. Faramarz, son of Rustam, was once made in charge of a grand army to liberate the entire land from Kargah to Hindustan and from Kashmir to Jadustan. At this time also Faramarz's army consisted of contingents from Kashmir.

There is a comparatively long description of a war between the Iranians and the Turanians in which the Indians fought along with Peeran. Here Firdausi, for the first time, gives the name of the Indian ruler as Shangal, the king of Kannauj. Peeran addresses him "O ye noble from India who rules over the land from Sharvan to Sindh. You aided yesterday to bring soldiers from all directions and after eliminating Iranian knights would, challenge Rustam and finally knock him down". Shangal again pledged to do the

same. The description of the arrangement of the army by Shangal is interesting and informative for it reveals the Indian system of warfare as known to Firdausi and his contemporaries. Shangal divided his army in three divisions. One division consisted of war elephants with columns of soldiers extending over two miles. The elephant Drivers wore multi- coloured headwear embellished with cornets and earrings. Gold necklaces adorned their necks and golden belts girdled their waists. The elephant backs were covered with Chinese silk cloth. A golden throne cum haudah was placed on a white elephant. Shangal ordered the beating of war drums. He then went into the open space between the two armies with an Indian sword in his hand. An Indian umbrella was held over his head. He called Rustam as a Segzi man which enraged Rustam. After abusing Shangal, in the ensuing encounter, Rustam lifted Shangal up from the saddle and flung him to the ground. The Turanians rushed to his rescue and carried him away to safety.

Afterwards Rustam waged successful campaigns in India. Kai Khusrau ruled over some parts of India.

Afrasiyab for saving himself from the Iranians, was once instructed to take refuge at Behishtgang where wise men from India and Byzantine were staying. Behishtgang and Gangdesh in Shahnameh obviously refer to some places in India. It should be mentioned here that the names of a number of persons and places of India referred to by Firdausi have yet to be recognised. If located, they may add to the authenticity of Firdausi's account. Lohrasp, a Kayani king, sent emissaries to some prosperous countries including India. Wise men and skilled artisans from India also flocked to the court of this king.

When Goshtasp, son of Lohrasp, sat on the throne, he ordered a fire to be lighted and Indian incense was burnt in it. Indian rulers sent offerings to Goshtasp.

Aspandiyar, a great warrior and son of Goshtasp, travelled all over India to propagate Zoroastrian faith. Coming to know about his faith and being convinced of it, the rulers of India accepted his ways and conventions. It is further interesting to note that Firdausi informs that these rulers burnt all the idols and lit fire in their places to demolish the very convention of idol worship.

Great men of Hindustan used to talk about the exploits of Rustam, the Iranian national hero. In the battle between Faramarz and the king of Kabul, a great number of notable Indians were killed. The relations between Iran and India continued when Darab (Dara or Darius the III) sat on the throne. It was he who invited experienced Indian engineers to dig a canal that would carry the water to every province. Darab, on being defeated by Alexander, wrote a letter to Foor (Porus) of India for help. It should be pointed out that the details given by Firdausi about Alexander and his expeditions in India

are not only interesting, revealing and detailed, but hardly found in the Indian sources of that time. In view of the comprehensive account of Alexander's Indian expeditions, it can be assumed that a record of them was available to Firdausi. Successors of Alexander ruled over Iran for nearly eighty years. It is possible that the account of Alexander's exploits in India was maintained by these successors of his and the same, in some form or the other, was available to the Iranians.

The account of Alexander's Indian campaigns in *Shahnameh* as referred to earlier, is important because of the scarcity of such material in Indian sources. Hence it is being reproduced here in brief:

While returning from China, Alexander marched from Chagran to Sindh. The horsemen of Sindh welcomed him for they were dissatisfied with Foor. The ruler of Sindh at that time was one named Bandava, an exalted and reputed horseman.

Alexander then approached a city in India called Milad ruled by Kaid. Before attacking the city, he wrote a letter to Kaid asking him to surrender. Kaid, in response to this letter, sent an epistle offering the following four things which were unknown to the world:

1. A daughter, Fughestan, on seeing whose face the sun will become dark. The odour of milk emanates from her two lips. On seeing her erect stature the cypress becomes curved. She scatters pearls while talking. Her wisdom transcends the beauty of her appearance and countenance. Her expression nourishes wisdom. She is Godly and possesses a modest mind free from excesses of any kind.
2. A cup which, if filled with water or wine, does not get emptied even if the material therein is consumed for ten years by a number of people. Its level also does not decrease by drinking.
3. A physician who is able to diagnose the disease on seeing the tears of the eyes. His association with the court will save the king from disease.
4. A philosopher who can predict to the king all that is going to happen from the revolution of the sun and shining of the moon.

Alexander, on receiving the letter from the Indian king, selected a few men from among the Byzantines known for their wisdom, knowledge and non-violent nature. He sent them to see these four things. They saw all the four objects and were bewildered seeing the beauty charm and radiant face of the daughter of the king. The Indian king handed over all the four things to these officials to be taken to Alexander.

The king selected everything that was most appropriate to send with his daughter (as dowry) to Alexander. Ten camels were laden only with denars (gold coins). One hundred camels were laden with dirams (silver coin). Three hundred camels were laden with cloth and royal pearls. An imposing howdah was made out of fragrant wood covered with gold and jewels. Thrones were mounted upon ten elephants. A saddle was put upon the most imposing elephant. Along with these commodities, Fughestan, the Indian princess departed along with the Byzantine officials with tears in her eyes.

Alexander tested the philosopher, the physician and the cup sent by king of India and found them as unique and worthy as claimed by the king and so demanded nothing further from him. Alexander then marched towards Foor (Porus) and wrote him a letter to surrender to which Foor did not agree. On the contrary, Foor admonished him that: your inner mind is like the Satan's rust. Do not sow seeds of meanness in the world. Be afraid of Nemesis and evil reaction of the times. I have sought to reform you by embellishing your mind with wisdom. In the ensuing battle the interesting detail of which has been given by Firdausi, Foor, with mountain like body mounted on a dragon, was finally killed in the battlefield. Alexander then handed over the throne to one named Suvorg to rule over India.

Alexander also goes to the land of Brahmins and holds a lengthy and useful dialogue with them about their contribution to the welfare of the world. The Brahmins explain the transitory nature of this world and need for its renunciation. Alexander was satisfied with this discussion with Brahmins and so offered many gifts to them, but none took anything for they were free of avarice.

The devastating expeditions of Alexander in Iran and India did not deter the people of these two countries from re-establishing their age old friendly relations.

Ardshir (224- 241 AD), the founder of the Sassanian kingdom, had friendly relations with Kaid of India who was also a wise man. Ardshir consulted him about the future of his monarchy. Yazdgard, another Sassanian ruler, sent deputations to India and Bahram Gur came in disguise as an envoy to the court of Shangal, the Indian ruler.

What Bahram saw in India and particularly in the palace and court of Shangal is again revealing about the social and cultural conditions of India at that time. When Bahram approached Shangal's palace, he saw the door and curtain of his court and the palace was a magnificent structure well guarded with weapons and accessories. Horsemen and elephants were stationed at the entrance. The noise made by the clanging of symbols and ringing of bells rent the air. Bahram, himself a king of a prosperous country, was amazed at the appearance of the court. He informed the door keeper: "I am the envoy of the

victorious Bahram". The master of ceremonies of the court immediately contacted the king who ordered the curtain to be lifted and had Bahram the envoy escorted with honour to the presence of the king. Bahram walked in gracefully. He saw a room whose ceiling was made of crystal. As he came nearer to Shangal, Shangal sat down on the throne wearing the crown. The base of the throne was made of gold and crystal. Shangal was wearing trousers made of silver and gold inlaid with numerous pearls. Shangal's brother was sitting at the foot of the throne wearing a jewelled coronet. Shangal's adviser was sitting next to him and the king's son was standing in front of the throne. Shangal ordered a golden chair to be put at the foot of the throne for the Iranian envoy to sit.

After knowing the identity of Bahram, Shangal married his daughter to Bahram who took her to Iran. Afterwards Shangal paid a visit to Iran along with the rulers of Kabul, Sindh, Sandal, Kashmir and Multan.

It is interesting to note that, according to Firdausi, Iran and India exchanged epistles in their own languages. Obviously, therefore, those conversant with Pahlavi were present in Hindustan and those well versed in Indian languages were available in Iran. Shangal, because of the close family relations with the Iranian royal family, gave Sapinu the right over India. This farman was written in Indian language on silk. It was Shangal who sent ten thousand Lories (singers) both male and female who were expert in their art. In Iran they were provided with a bullock and a nass to be engaged in cultivation of land. Nushirawan came to India and stayed here for sometime. Indian traders used to visit Iran to sell Indian products. The Iranians were supposed to be so close to India, its culture and religion that once Qaiser-e-Rum asked Kharrad son of Burzeen: "What is the status of a Hindu as far as his religion is concerned. Whatever they may worship, are they really idol worshipers or what are they, themselves, essentially? Kharrad explained: "In India, the cow and the moon are the rulers. They do not turn towards God nor the revolving heavens. None of them has any love for body. They do not turn away from the revolving sun and do not regard people like us as learned. Everyone of them who lights the fire plunges into it to burn himself. They believe that there is a fire in the atmosphere by the command of the all ruling God, which the learned men of India call by the name of Ether. They give description of it with their eloquent tongue in a pleasant manner, saying that the earthly fire merges with the fire above, thus burning away all their sins. Hence they think it right to light fire and burn their bodies in it."

An account of the Indian game chess (shatranj) given by Firdausi is too detailed to be found in Indian documents of that period. It should be pointed out that there are some sources in Arabic, Sanskrit and Pahlavi on shatranj but the modern historians still refer to Shahnameh in connection with shatranj which means that Shahnameh is indispensable in

this regard. Since the information furnished by Firdausi about shatranj throws more light on its history, a summary of the same is given here.

An Indian envoy from Kannauj to the court of Anushirawan presented the game of chess alongwith other offerings like elephants, umbrella horsemen from Sindh, rubies, diamonds, Indian swords sheathed in jewelled scabbards and some other products of Kannauj.

In the preparation of the chess board a considerable ingenuity was spent. The envoy conveyed the Raja's message in Indian language to say:

“Tell the wise men of your court to discover the fine points of this game. If they succeed in this task and are able to surpass those who already know this game, I shall send with pleasure to you whatever tribute is demanded or otherwise tribute should not be demanded from this land.”

Anushirawan asked Buzarjmehr, his wise minister, to unravel the mystery of this game. He, after a prolonged endeavour, was able to unravel the nature of the game and informed the king accordingly. The king informed the Indian envoy that the solution to this fine game has been found which amazed the Indian envoy. As a return gesture, Buzarjmehr invented the game of backgammon (Nard) and brought it to the court of the Raja of Kannauj. The Indians could not understand this Iranian game. Buzarjmehr, therefore, explained it to the Raja and his courtiers.

Firdausi, apart from it, has also described the story of the invention of chess which was narrated by an old man named Shahu that: there was a king in India named Jamhoor more famous than Foor (Poras). He was wise, alert and enlightened. His capital was Sandal. His wife was also equally wise, intelligent, skillful, learned and peace loving. She gave birth to a son by Jamhoor who was named Gav. Jamhoor died after sometime and his wife married Jamhoor's brother named Mai who also sat on the throne of Sandal. The queen gave birth to another son by Mai who was named Talhand. At this time Gav was seven years old. Mai also died after a lapse of some time and so the queen sat on the throne to be handed over to the elder son Gav when he reaches puberty. When the time to succeed to the throne approached, both these step brothers differed on the question of succession to the throne and hence there was a war in between the two. Talhand was killed in the battle which grieved the queen. Gav with the help of his advisers invented the chess board to explain the movements of the armies to his mother to show that he never intended to kill his brother.

Firdausi has given a detailed and vivid descriptions of chess in not less than 10 pages

which shows the deep interest of the Iranians in this game of India. It should also be pointed out here that there is a treatise in Pahlavi entitled *chaturang Namek* on chess which may be one of the sources of Firdausi.

Firdausi also refers to another historic event in the annals of Indo-Iran relations. It is the translation of *Panchatantra*, one of the Indian Classics, into Pahlavi by Burzuy, the physician of Anushirwan's court.

Burzuy once intimated Anushirawan about his going through a chronicle of the Hindus and coming across an account of a herb in the mountains of India which, if collected under guidance and compounded with the required knowledge, when sprinkled upon a dead man, he starts speaking. Anushirawan permitted Burzuy to visit India with a companion and innumerable gifts including Byzantine silk which the Hindus wore.

Burzuy came to India and embarked on exploring the herb with the co-operation of the learned physicians of India but to no avail. Ultimately another wise man of India, when contacted by Burzuy, told him "We also came across that reference and then investigated it. I shall narrate now our findings. The enlightened mind should realise the significance of what they have heard. The herb is to be regarded as the learned man and knowledge as the mountain which remains far away from the gaze of men throughout the year. The dead body is like an ignorant which remains unhappy everywhere. A man, undoubtedly, remains full of life with knowledge. Blessed is the painstaking persevering man. When a man becomes helpless due to ignorance, the herb is like *kalileh* and knowledge like the mountain. It is a book which guides you to knowledge".

You will find this book in the royal treasury. The king, however, showed the book to Burzuy and permitted him to study it in his presence and not to copy it. Burzuy used to read daily only that much part which he could memorise and translate the same at his residence regularly. Thus he brought the book to his country.

This account of India and the political and cultural relation between India and Iran, the two ancient countries, given by Firdousi in his *Shahnameh* is both interesting and important. As referred to earlier, *Shahnameh* is not strictly a book of history. Hence, this account is yet to be corroborated by other such sources which can be relied upon historically. However, till such verification is not forthcoming, Firdousi's account deserves to be regarded as a basic source for the concerned subject.