

Spycraft and Sovereignty in 17th Century India: A Study of Ishwardas Nagar's Account in Futuhat-i-Alamgiri

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Abstract

This article explores the intricate mechanisms of intelligence gathering in the 17th-century Mughal Empire, as depicted by Ishwardas Nagar in his historical work, *Futuhat-i-Alamgiri*. To control a centralized state, the kings developed a system of intelligence gathering. The sources of seventeenth century provide important information regarding the system of intelligence gathering. One valuable source of them is *Futuhat-i-Alamgiri*, written by Ishwardas Nagar and translated by Tasneem Ahmad from Persian to English. This monograph of Ishwardas Nagar provides very useful information about the state functioning in later half of seventeenth century. "Futuhat-i-Alamgiri." Focusing on the reign of Emperor Aurangzeb, the study delves into the extensive network of informants, the use of detailed reports and letters, and the critical role of military, economic, and political intelligence. Nagar's narrative provides vivid accounts of the state's reliance on accurate information to make strategic decisions, highlighting the roles of key officials and the challenges they faced. This examination offers a comprehensive understanding of the sophisticated intelligence apparatus that supported Mughal governance and warfare.

Keywords

Intelligence gathering, Mughal Empire, 17th century, Ishwardas Nagar, *Futuhat-i-Alamgiri*, Aurangzeb, Informants, Military intelligence, Economic intelligence, Political surveillance

17th century is a significant chapter of Indian history. Its first half is known for the art and cultural development in India in which artisans and artists contributed significantly in their fields. The first quarter of the century is known for development of the court painting as well as regional paintings¹. The second quarter of the century is famous for the architectural development in India². The latter half of the century is known for political development³. In this period, the Mughal state extended its boundary further inside

south India. The main political incident of this period was the war of succession among the sons of Mughal king Shah Jahan and subsequent victory of prince Aurangzeb in this war of succession. In this century, large part of India was ruled by the Mughal kings. According to great historian, Sir Jadunath Sarkar, Mughal state that was governed by Mughal kings, was a form of centralized despotism⁴. To control a centralized state the kings developed a system of intelligence gathering⁵. The sources of that period gave important information regarding the system of intelligence gathering⁶. One valuable source of them, Futuhat-i-Alamgiri was written by Ishwardas Nagar. This monograph of Ishwardas Nagar provides very useful information about the state functioning in latter half of seventeenth century⁷. A humble attempt has been made in this paper to highlight the importance of Futuhat-i-Alamgiri as a source of intelligence gathering.

In the later half of the 17th century, the Mughal king was Aurangzeb. He reigned a large part of India from 1658 AD to 1707 AD⁸. His reign was very long, about 50 years. His predecessors started the tradition of writing the official history. But after ten years of his reign, the recording of main incidents in the court was stopped. The official historian, Muhammed Kazim, stopped the writing of Alamgirnama, an official history⁹. But some unofficial contemporary commentators left their own writings of that period in which the main incidents of his reign were recorded. These writings are the main sources of history of that period. The main sources are Masir-i-Alamgiri of Saqi Mustaid Khan, Muntakhab-ul-Lubab of Khafi Khan, Nuskho-i-Dilkhusa of Bhimsen and Futuhat-i-Alamgiri of Ishwardas etc. These are the main sources of the history of kings of seventeenth century. Although, the main subject of these sources was to discuss the polity of that period but some useful administrative, economic and social information was also reflected from these sources.

Futuhat-i-Alamgiri is a very important and useful source of history of later half of seventeenth century. It was written or recorded by Ishwardas Nagar, a Nagar Brahmin of Gujarat. The source was translated by Tasneem Ahmad from Persian to English and published in 1978 from New Delhi as Ishwardas Nagar's Futuhat-i-Alamgiri in book form¹⁰. The book was foreworded by historian, Satish Chandra. In the forewording of the book, historian Satish Chandra said that it is an important source of information for various developments during the reign of the king, Aurangzeb. He also congratulated Tasneem Ahmad for translating a very useful source for the students of history who do not know the classical Persian language. In the acknowledgement of the translated book, Tasneem Ahmad described it as a valuable source of history with a difference. He says that, it is a non commissioned, non-official work which was neither

written to glorify the reign of Aurangzeb nor to denigrate it nor to win any person's favor, but certainly for the benefit of posterity¹¹.

According to the translator, Ishwardas, the writer of *Futuh-at-i-Alamgiri*, claimed that he composed it for personal knowledge and witnessed most of the events¹². Ishwardas Nagar was patronized by chief judge (Qazi-ul-Quzat) of the state. He also worked under another noble Shujaet Khan, the governor of Gujarat. Tasneem Ahmad claimed that Ishwardas Nagar composed *Futuh-at-i-Alamgiri* during 1699-1700 AD¹³.

Futuh-at-i-Alamgiri is a very important source of history of later half of the 17th century. The first incident that was described in the *Futuh-at-i-Alamgiri*, was the illness of the Mughal emperor Shah Jahan¹⁴. The monograph also gives a detailed sketch of the war of succession between the sons of Emperor Shah Jahan. The last important incident described in the book was the conquest of fort of Rajgarh from Raja Ram, *Maratha*¹⁵.

Ishwardas Nagar in his monograph, *Futuh-at-i-Alamgiri* provides information regarding the wars, administrative system, politics, diplomacy and character of the king of state. The source provides ample information regarding the political development under the king Aurangzeb and gives a sketch of intelligence gathering of state¹⁶. He mentioned the names of the agents who gathered secret information and transmitted it to the king. He also gives details of persons who give secret information regarding deeds of government officials, nobles and enemies to the king.

The official was *Daroga-i-harkara*¹⁷ and persons were *harkara*¹⁸, *spy*¹⁹, *waqia nigar*²⁰ and *khufianavis*²¹ worked as agents of secret information gathering. Ishwardas Nagar described that when the *Rathor Rajputs* revolted against the state under the leadership of Durgadas, king issued order to *Daroga-i-harkara*²² to send the *harkara* as spies to bring the news of rebellious *Rajputs*²³. In another instance, the *Daroga-i-harkara*, Muhammed Ali, reported that some *harkara* were sent to bring the news of *Maratha* leader, Sambhaji at the time of war against the *Marathas*²⁴. These two descriptions indicate that *Daroga-i-harkara* was the chief of *harkara* who appointed the *harkara* and *spy* to collect the secret information which was very urgent to the king or state. It is assumed that he had significant role in intelligence gathering. *Daroga-i-harkara* replied through *Daroga-i-Ghusalkhana* to the king that his order was implemented and *harkara* was sent²⁵. It indicates that the *Daroga-i-Ghusalkhana* was more important official than *Daroga-i-harkara*.

Futuhat-i-Alamgiri described that the harkara brought very useful information. The term *harkara*²⁶ was used in plural form multiple time so there were many *harkara*. They reported directly to the king. According to Ishwardas Nagar, when Shivaji, the *Maratha*, escaped from Delhi and reached Deccan, then a harkara submitted his report to the king that the noble, Dilir Khan had reached the vicinity of Deccan to pursue him²⁷. The discussion of Mughal noble Mahabat Khan with *afghan* tribal chief and his failure²⁸, actual situation of rebel Durgadas Rathor and his army at the time of *Rajput* revolt²⁹, indiscipline of prince Muhammad Azam at the time of *Rajput* revolt³⁰ and at the time of war against Bijapur,³¹ bravery and courage of some Mughal noble in war against Bijapur³², actual position and movement of the rebel prince Akabar in *Deccan*,³³ reassembling of enemies after the defeat at the fort Salhir in *Deccan*³⁴, actual situation of *maratha* king Sambhaji's family³⁵ and his brother Raja Ram³⁶ were reported to the king by *harkaras* as mentioned in Futuhat-i-Alamgiri. According to Ishwardas Nagar, the incident of the attack by Marathas on Mughal army³⁷ and comparison of noble Ghaziudin Khan Bahadur with the grace of the king by noble's slaves were also conveyed literally by *harkara* to the king³⁸. So, Ishwardas Nagar clearly mentioned that *harkara* communicated with the king orally as well as in written form.

Beside the *harkara*, *Khufianavis* was another person who was used for intelligence gathering by the king in Mughal state as mentioned by Ishwardas Nagar in Fatuhat-i-Alamgiri. Intelligence input of movement of the rebel prince Akbar and Durgadas in south India were reported by *Khufianavis* to the king³⁹. Ishwardas Nagar mentioned that one another person who collect secret information for the king was Waqainigar. The rebellious activities of Debi Singh and other *Bundela* leaders were reported to the king by Waqainigar of Bundelkhand⁴⁰.

Another secret agent who gathered secret information for the king was *Swanignigar* as described by Ishwardas Nagar in his chronicle Futuhat-i-Alamgiri. Activity of Maratha king Shivaji and his motive was reported by Swanignigar to Aurangzeb in detail⁴¹.

The king also deployed the spies to watch the activities of state nobles. According to Ishwardas Nagar, when rebellion of Gopal Singh occurred in the vicinity of Gwalior, activities of nobles were reported to the king by the spies⁴². On another occasion, activities of a dismissed noble Abdul Shakoos son of Uzbek Khan were reported by a spy to the state⁴³.

So, Futuhat-i-Alamgiri of Ishwardas Nagar gives very important information regarding the intelligence gathering in the 17th century. It is a very important source for those who are interested in espionage or secret information gathering system that was adopted by a state or a king in the past. It also indicated

that intelligence gathering was need of hour in a centralized state. Once, Aurangzeb became worried when the news from different places did not reach him⁴⁴. So, in short it may be said that intelligence gathering was very essential for king who had a vast kingdom and centralized system of operating government and to study it, the monograph of Ishwardas Nagar is a very important source.

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