

## Persian Historiographical Contributions to Medieval Indian History: An Analysis of Isāmi's *Futuh-U Salatin*

Dr Sameena Kausar

Associate Professor, Department of Arabic, MANUU, India

**\*Corresponding Author:** Dr Sameena Kausar, Associate Professor, Department of Arabic, MANUU, India

**Abstract:** This paper examines the Persian historiographical tradition in medieval India through a critical analysis of *Futuh-us-Salatin* by 'Abd al-Malik Isāmi, a 14th-century historian and poet. Composed in the Deccan during the early years of the Bahmani Sultanate, *Futuh-us-Salatin* stands as a significant literary and historical source that reflects the socio-political upheavals of the period, including the decline of the Delhi Sultanate and the rise of regional powers. Written in elegant Persian verse, Isāmi's work combines historical narrative with poetic imagination, presenting a unique fusion of fact and literary art. This paper explores the methodological frameworks employed by Isāmi, his sources of information, and his ideological motivations—particularly his critique of the Delhi Sultanate and his loyalty to the Bahmani cause. By contextualizing Isāmi within the broader tradition of Persian historiography in India, the study highlights how Persian as a language of power and culture shaped the recording and interpretation of Indian history. The paper argues that *Futuh-us-Salatin* is not only a valuable historical record but also a reflection of medieval Indo-Persian intellectual and cultural currents. Through this analysis, the paper contributes to a deeper understanding of the intersection between literature, politics, and historiography in medieval India.

**Keywords:** Persian Sources, *Futuh-u's Salatin*, History, Historiography, Medieval India. Isami, *Shahnama e Hind*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The simplest definition of history could be that it is a collection of records and chronicles of past events. Knowledge of these past events is crucial for any civilized society, as it helps us familiarize ourselves with the past and chaperones to enhance and accentuate our present and future.

Early history writings were mere records of events and happenings, but with the advancement of knowledge, the art of history writing became organized, systematic, and sophisticated. New rules were formed, and the historian was supposed to be the most knowledgeable person about a particular event. We can also call 'history' a dialogue between the past and the present.

According to E.H. Carr, not every event holds historical significance; instead, the interpretation of that event bestows significance. Carr argues that interpretation is the lifeblood of history. In exploring the question, "What is history?" Carr asserts that history is a continuous interaction between historians and their facts, an unending dialogue between the present and the past (Carr, 1962).

Historiography is known as *ilm-al-tarikh* in Arabic. The account of all activities of the human race is called history. It is the study of history and methodology of the discipline of history. In ancient India, no fixed and specific methods were followed regarding the preservation and compilation of historical events. Moreover, it was preserved through the oral system. This system helps preserve religious rules and regulations, restrictions, and other social rules. However, it is not sufficient to establish a permanent system of preserving all historical data and events, especially those related to India's dynastic rule. By the end of a dynasty, all glorious achievements and contributions of that dynasty were also going to end (Absar, 2014).

The sources of medieval Indian history writing are vast and varied, providing a wealth of material for historians and general readers alike. The source material is rich and diverse, from *malfuzat* literature to political chronicles, *maktubat* and general treatises. The fact that many of these resources exist in the Persian language is a further testament to the breadth of the topic. *Taj-u'l-Ma'asir* by Sadr-u'd-Din Hasan Nizami, *Tabaqat-i-Nasiri* by Minhaj-u's-Siraj Jurjāni, *Jami u'l-Tawareekh* by Rashid-u'd-Din

Fazl-Ullah, *Futuh-u's Salatin* by Isāmi, *Ain e Akbari* by Abul Fazl to mention a few. Such constraints prompted many dynamic historians to explore new pastures represented by unconventional sources such as *malfuzat* (table talks) involving the *murshid*. (Nizami, 1985)

## 2. FUTUH-US SALATIN

Isami's (1311-...?) *Futuh-us Salatin* is a Persian work on the model of Firdausi's *Shahnama*. Firdausi (940-1025) wrote *Shahnama* between 977 and 1010. The book is dedicated To Sultan Alauddin Hasan Bahman Shah, founder of the Bahmani dynasty. It consists of some 50,000 couplets; the *Shahnama* is one of the world's most extensive epic poems created by a single author and is the national epic of Greater Iran<sup>1</sup>. *Futuh-us Salatin* is the only versified history of Medieval India, which covers 350 years. It starts from Sultan Mahmood of Ghaznin (990-1030) and ends at 1350. This was an extraordinary task taken by Isami. However, there are other examples of poets taking poetry to record history, like Khusrav in his *masnavis*, who dealt with individual rulers or specific events. (Nizami, 1985)

Isami's *Futuh-us Salatin* exemplifies a sophisticated blend of historiography and moral didacticism, underscoring themes central to Islamic governance and divine justice. A notable example is the portrayal of just rulers, whose adherence to Sharia principles and commitment to their subjects' welfare lead to spiritual and temporal triumphs. This is juxtaposed with narratives of leaders whose moral failings result in their downfall, serving as a cautionary tale within the framework of divine retribution. The text frequently invokes Quranic allusions and poetic flourishes, enhancing its rhetorical appeal while reinforcing the notion that human agency operates within the bounds of divine will. Additionally, Isami's depiction of interactions with non-Muslim powers highlights Islamic civilisation's ethical and intellectual superiority, often through accounts of diplomatic or martial engagements where Muslim protagonists embody ideals of courage, wisdom, and faith. This interplay of historical narrative and moral instruction positions *Futuh-us Salatin* as a seminal work in the Islamic historiographical tradition.

Historians have mentioned many reasons for Isami's inspiration to compose this book. One major one is the *Shahnama* of Firdausi, which sketches Mahmood on a broader canvas of Indian history.

The Agra edition of *Futuh-us Salatin* was published in 1938. Agha Mahdi Hasan edited it after studying India Office Manuscript No: 895 in London. The total number of verses in *Futuh-us Salatin* is twelve thousand. Agha Mahdi Hasan saw Professor Usha's edition of the *Futuh-us Salatin*, which contained three hundred more verses supposedly added to the manuscript by Professor Usha. Isami writes at the beginning of the book, 'In these days when learning is at a discount and knowledge is not in request, I have set my hands to composing the *Futuh-us Salatin*, which contains twelve thousand verses.'<sup>2</sup> The number twelve thousand is the number of verses Isami composed, but neither of the two available manuscripts gives the total number.<sup>3</sup> It is very clear from both manuscripts that both are copies of an original one which is now extinct. Agha Hasan opines that the Hyderabad edition is safer from the wear and tear of the time and is more beautiful. While both are written in *Nastaliq*, the India Office manuscript looks older (Isami, *Futuhus Salatin*, 1967).

Isami was born three hundred and ninety-nine lunar years after the birth of Firdausi. He was born in Delhi in 1311 during the reign of Sultan *Alauddin Khilji*. He lost his father at a tender age and thus became a self-made man, as his pen name suggests.<sup>4</sup>

Part one of the *Futuh-us Salatin* contains the 'Argument', the pen name Isami undertook (verses 1-288). From verse 289 onwards, he introduces the Shah Namah and Isami, the story's narrator.

Isami's *Futuh-us Salatin*, also known as *Shahnama e Hind*, starts with the Tauheed (oneness of Allah and praising Him), followed by mentions of Prophet *PBUH* and *Khulafa e Rashidin*. It begins with the birth of Sultan Mahmud of Ghaznin, his accession, his invasion of Balkh, and his death in 1030. It ends with the arrival of Sultan Alauddin Bahman Shah at Gulbarga in 1349 (Isami, *Futuhus Salatin*, 1898)

## 3. GEOGRAPHY IN FUTUH-US SALATIN

Geography is the science of the earth's surface. Geography is essential to studying history because it provides context and understanding of the physical and human environment in which historical events

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<sup>1</sup> Greater Iran, also referred to as Greater Persia, covers areas that have Iranian cultural influence. The areas include Central Asia, West Asia, Caucasus, and some parts of South Asia.

<sup>2</sup> (*Futuhus-Salatin-Or-Shah-Namah-I-Hind-Of-Isami-Vol-i*, n.d.)

<sup>3</sup> (*Futuhus-Salatin-Or-Shah-Namah-I-Hind-Of-Isami-Vol-i*, n.d.)

<sup>4</sup> Isami is an Arabic word which means self-made man.

occurred. A region's geography shapes how people live, work, and interact with each other and their environment. Geography is delving into the soul of a region, as noted by Jean Smirt in "Some Aspects of Human Geography in Latin American Literature":

"Almost always, the present can be explained only by the past. It is by the Interaction of history into geography that one attains the very soul of a country."<sup>5</sup>

One of the major notable facts that can be derived from reading *Futuh-us Salatin* is that Isami loved India immensely. It was his love for the Indian soil that made him want to live, die, and leave offspring here despite his celibacy. "What a beautiful country is Hindustan! She is so beautiful that even paradise is envious of her; Hindustan is an ornament to the globe, enhancing its beauty like a mole on a sweetheart's face (Isami, *Futuh-us Salatin*, 1967).

*Futuh-us Salatin* signifies Indian soil with all its geographic features, including soil, topography, population, climate, and the natural elements gifted to it by the sky. The subject matter of geography, bringing out its effect on history, nature, and the course of events, needs to be traced. The Himalayas are mentioned as the Indian mountains. Among the hills, Koh Ali Shah and Koh-I Jud are discussed together.

In the course of his account of Mahmud of Ghazni, Isami introduces some anecdotes which were concocted in order to idolise Mahmud. The Prophet is reported to have prayed to God in his lifetime to demolish the temple of Somnath. His prayer was heard, and the fact that the demolition would take place at the hands of Mahmud was intimated to him from on high. The Prophet then desired to see Mahmud, and the image of Mahmud was providentially installed before him. This occurred some three hundred years before the birth of Mahmud (Husain, 1944).

Isami was 39-40 when he composed *Futuh-us Salatin* (Nizami, 1983). Although he had spent 24 years in Daulatabad and had become a *Deccani* by then, his love for Delhi was undying. The memories of the glorious past in Delhi would tease him, and he would become nostalgic. Being cut off from Delhi was like an uprooted tree for him, with its roots in Delhi but the physical being in Deccan (Habibullah, 1976).

Isami was asked to leave Delhi when Sultan Muhammad bin Tughlaq ordered the departure of *ulama*, *mashaikh*, and politicians to Deogir. Isami's ancestors lived in Delhi, and he had an emotional connection to it. It must have been tough for him to leave the place. The sultan's order spared no one, whether old, sick, or disabled. This grief hurt Isami badly, and he became bitter towards Tughlaq. His hatred towards the Sultan continued to deepen. This is why we see him sad whenever something or someone is uprooted. He praises Sultan Mahmud for not destroying even a sparrow's nest and criticizes Aibek for cleansing an area occupied by tanners of hide.<sup>6</sup>

#### 4. STYLE OF FUTUH-US SALATIN

*Futuh-us Salatin* is composed in a simple and direct style. It does not express any poetic enthusiasm. Isami has tried to keep his ideas within certain specified territories and has kept his imagination from wandering into irrelevant realms. One can quickly discern that the poet feels immensely responsible as a historian and avoids burdening the text with rhetorical expressions or poetic imagery. *Khaleeq Ahmad Nizami* has considered Isami's directness and adherence to the theme an edge over *Amir Khusrau*, who frequently used imagery, metaphors, and similes in his books, excluding *Miftah ul Futuh*(n.d.).

Isami conveyed the assessment of medieval India based on the general public impression, which is occasionally verified by reliable sources. His imagination in recording military situations is impeccable, for example, in his account of the conflict between Muhammad Ghori and Rai Pithora and Prince Muhammad's conflict with the Mongols.

"The following day, at sunrise, both the armies took their respective positions in the field, and the clouds of dust, raised by them, passed beyond the ninth vault of the sky."<sup>7</sup>

"On the other side, the enemy-hunting king put his army in battle array to the left and right. He took his stand in the centre, surrounded by his obedient troops. The demon capturing Khitbak was in the

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<sup>5</sup> Cited by Jane Rausch in his article "Relationship between history and Geography in the study of the Llanos

<sup>6</sup> *Futuh-us Salatin*:p.56

<sup>7</sup> *Futuh-us Salatin*:1457-1458

vanguard, and the intelligent Alba was in the right-wing... When the armies on both sides were set in battle array, dust arose from their springing from side to side.<sup>8</sup>

His verses about Khizr Khan<sup>9 10</sup> and his romance are dull, which shows that he was bland about romantic episodes (Nizami, 1983).

Isami refers to conversations between different characters during his narration. These conversations cannot be considered reliable sources of history; instead, they are based on a general impression from the following incidents. They are works of Isami's imagination. However, *Futuh-us Salatin*, in some places, serves as a corrective to the most outstanding works of the period *Tabaqat-i- Nasiri* of Minhaj-u's-Siraj and the *Tarikh-i-Firoz Shahi* of Zia-u'd-din Barni. Minhaj does not write about the last six years of Nasir-u'd-din Mahmud's reign. Isami fills this gap with *Futuh-us Salatin*. Isami has provided some exciting bits of information that help the reader understand the period's general political and cultural atmosphere (Nizami, 1983).

Isami's style in *Futuh-us Salatin* is a masterful synthesis of rhetorical flourish, poetic eloquence, and historiographical precision, reflecting the rich tradition of Islamic literature. His prose is deeply imbued with Quranic allusions, prophetic traditions, and aphorisms, lending the text a moral and spiritual authority that transcends mere historical narrative. Isami frequently employs *saj'* (rhymed prose), a hallmark of classical Arabic literature, to heighten the text's aesthetic and mnemonic qualities.

His vivid imagery and elaborate metaphors animates historical events, imbuing them with symbolic and didactic significance. Furthermore, Isāmi integrates poetic interludes into his narrative, showcasing his literary versatility and aligning the text with the broader Arabic tradition of blending poetry with prose.

This stylistic richness enhances the work's literary value and engages and instructs the audience, ensuring that historical accounts are as memorable as they are instructive. is a masterful synthesis of rhetorical flourish, poetic eloquence, and historiographical precision, reflecting the rich tradition of Islamic literature. His prose is deeply imbued with Quranic allusions, prophetic traditions, and aphorisms, lending the text a moral and spiritual authority that transcends mere historical narrative.

## 5. FINDINGS

Isami needs to mention the sources of his Shah Nama e Hind. Although he refers to some reliable witnesses, their names should be mentioned. Below are key features of his style:

### 5.1. Persian Literary Influence

Isami's *Futuhus-Salatin* is a significant historical work written in Persian, documenting the conquests of various sultans. His style reflects a mixture of Persian literary elegance and Islamic historiographical traditions. **Rhymed Prose (Saj')**: A hallmark of Persian historical writing, Isami incorporated rhythm and rhyme into his prose, which made his narrative more engaging and musical.

### 5.2. Chronological and Thematic Organization

**Structured Historiography:** Isami's work is organized systematically and chronologically. He presents events as a sequential narrative, often starting with the reign of the prophet and leading to the Islamic rulers that followed.

- **Dynastic Histories:** *Futuhus-Salatin* mainly focuses on the histories of various Muslim dynasties, notably the Delhi Sultanate. This reflects his primary interest in political history and the conquests of Muslim rulers in the Indian subcontinent.

### 5.3. Influence of Islamic Historiography

- **Religious References:** As with many Islamic historians, Isami's work often references Islamic scripture, the Prophet Muhammad, and religious motifs, imbuing his historical writing with a moral or religious dimension.

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid:1465-1481

<sup>9</sup> <https://historyunravalled.com/warriors/khizr-khan--founder-of-the-sayyid-dynasty>

<sup>10</sup> Khizr Khan (reigned 28 May 1414 – 20 May 1421) was the founder of the Sayyid dynasty, the fourth ruling dynasty of the Delhi sultanate, in northern India

- **Glorification of Sultans:** Isami often glorifies the rulers and sultans he writes about, portraying their conquests and governance in a favourable light. This reflects a tradition of writing commissioned by or dedicated to rulers to legitimize and praise their rule.

#### 5.4. Incorporation of Oral and Written Sources

- **Historical Narratives:** Isami combines oral traditions, anecdotes, and folklore with written records. This gives his work a blend of mythical grandeur alongside documented history.
- **Persian and Arabic Sources:** Drawing on earlier historians and poets, both Persian and Arabic, Isami integrates various perspectives to create a comprehensive historical narrative.

#### 5.5. Courtly Language

- **Court-Centric View:** Written in the context of courtly patronage, his style reflects the decorum and grandeur of the royal courts, with praises directed at the rulers for their virtues, bravery, and justice.
- **Patronage and Flattery:** Like other courtly historians, Isami often employed flattery in his descriptions of the rulers, which was a typical feature in works written under royal patronage.

#### 5.6. Descriptive Battle Accounts

- **Detailed Military Descriptions:** His narratives of military campaigns and conquests are detailed and dramatic, often highlighting the heroism of the sultans and their generals.
- **Emphasis on Strategy:** Isami pays particular attention to the strategies employed in battle, which provides valuable insight into medieval Islamic warfare.

In summary, Isami's *Futuhus-Salatin* stands out for its rich, ornate Persian prose, structured and thematic historiography, and a narrative style that blends historical accuracy with literary embellishment. It reflects his literary training and Islamic historical background, making it a compelling piece of medieval historical writing.

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