



## Review article

# Exploring Indian Festivals: Insights from Al-Biruni's Research in Kitab al-Hind



Prof. Esmatullah Osmani

Research Professor, Department of Anthropology and Archaeology, Faculty of Social Science, Kabul University

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## ABSTRACT

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This library-based study extensively explores the historical tapestry of Afghanistan, positioning it as a significant crossroads for civilizations. The focus is on the documented accounts of scholars, particularly Aburihan Al-Biruni, during the era of Sultan Mahmood Ghaznavi. Al-Biruni's profound exploration of Hindu culture, initially in Afghanistan and later in India, is scrutinized through his seminal work "Research of Mullalind." In this work, Al-Biruni meticulously documented 28 distinct Hindu festivals, offering valuable insights into their characteristics and evolution over time. The study adeptly recognizes the dynamic nature of Hindu rituals, showcasing an awareness of the changes and adaptations that have occurred over centuries. It delves into the phenomenon where some festivals, once characterized by distinct traits, have evolved or disappeared, while others persist with modified practices. This research significantly contributes to a profound understanding of the historical Hindu festivals, illuminating the diverse cultural heritage that has indelibly shaped the region. Moreover, the study extends its focus to the enduring significance of popular Indian festivals celebrated in contemporary times, effectively bridging the historical narrative with present-day cultural practices. By undertaking a comparative analysis, the research not only enriches our comprehension of the past but also underscores the ongoing relevance of these festivals in the complex cultural mosaic of Afghanistan. This holistic examination underscores the intricate interplay between history, Cultural Revolution, and the enduring threads that connect ancient traditions with modern celebrations.

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## 1. Introduction

Abu Rihan Muhammad Al-Biruni bin Ahmad, a distinguished scholar, was born in the early hours of Thursday on the third of Dhu Hijjah in the year 363 AH (972 AD). (Kaminar, 2006) His life journey concluded in Ghazna in the year 440 AH (1048 AD). The backdrop of his early life in the suburbs of Khwarazm and later residence in Ghazna exposed him to a kaleidoscope of Indian communities. These included native Hindus from Kabul, prisoners of war, and free individuals who, seeking new opportunities had migrated to the heart of the city, engaging in diverse trades and contributing to architectural endeavors. (Courtois, 1952) Ghazna, a hub of cultural diversity, attracted businesspeople, legislators, soldiers, and bureaucrats from all corners of India (Lawrence, 1976).

Al-Biruni's immersion in the multifaceted Indian social groups of Ghazna provided him with a rich and unique perspective. The city's cosmopolitan nature became a fertile ground for cultural exchange and intellectual pursuits. (Lawrence, 1976) Dissatisfied with the limited

and potentially biased information about India that circulated in Ghazni, Al-Biruni undertook a transformative journey to the Indian subcontinent. While preceding travelers had explored India, their findings lacked enduring significance. (Sachau, 2000)

Al-Biruni's sojourn in India was marked by a relentless pursuit of understanding and scientific investigation. His work stands as a pivotal contribution, offering a more nuanced and comprehensive portrayal of India. By engaging with various facets of Indian society, Al-Biruni not only enriched his own intellectual pursuits but also left an indelible mark on the historical and scientific understanding of India for generations to come. (Said, 1981)

## 2. Perspectives of Foreign scientists on Abu Rihan al-Biruni

The opinions of foreign scientists about Abu Rihan al-Biruni have been overwhelmingly positive, recognizing him as a pioneering figure in various fields of knowledge during the Islamic Golden Age. Al-Biruni, born in 973 AD,

### \* Corresponding Author:

Email: [prof.osmani@yahoo.com](mailto:prof.osmani@yahoo.com) (Osmani)

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was a polymath who made significant contributions to astronomy, mathematics, physics, geography, and anthropology. (Yousuf, 2000)

Many foreign scientists and scholars have praised Al-Biruni for his comprehensive and systematic approach to scientific inquiry. His work "Kitab al-Hind" (Book of India) stands out as a remarkable achievement, showcasing his profound understanding of Indian culture, religion, and science. (Sharma, 1983) Foreign scientists appreciate Al-Biruni's dedication to learning and his ability to bridge different intellectual traditions. Furthermore, Al-Biruni's contributions to trigonometry and his accurate measurements of the Earth's radius have garnered admiration from scientists across cultures. (Yousuf, 2000) His open-mindedness, curiosity, and commitment to empirical observation have been commended by scholars worldwide.

In summary, foreign scientists view Abu Rihan al-Biruni as a highly respected and influential figure in the history of science, acknowledging his valuable contributions that transcended geographical and cultural boundaries during a crucial period of intellectual exchange. Several centuries before Al-Biruni, the Chinese pilgrim Hiuen Tsang extensively traveled in India, providing insightful knowledge about Indian religions. Despite Hiuen Tsang's earlier journey, his writings did not reach Al-Biruni. Notably, Dr. Seter Ashasteri, a Professor of Indian history and culture, emphasized Al-Biruni's unique perspective among foreign visitors to India. According to Dr. Ashasteri, Al-Biruni stands out as someone who examined India from an Indian viewpoint, offering a deeper understanding of the country's customs and habits. Various Indian scholars, including Dr. Muhammad Yasin, Dr. Tarachand, Mahidi Hasan Nasir, Dr. Shari Badi Lal, and Professor Mukerji, have written extensively on Abu Rihan Al-Biruni's significant roles in India. These scholars have composed tributes highlighting Al-Biruni's contributions. Al-Biruni's monumental work, "Research of Mullalind," focused on Hindu history and culture, spanning 13 years of research in India, resulting in 16 volumes on diverse Indian themes. He also translated and compiled twenty volumes of Sanskrit literature on Indian history.

Al-Biruni's writings underscore his respect and admiration for India's rich legacy, emphasizing his attempt to view the country from an Indian perspective, promoting understanding over hostility. (Saleem Khan, 2001) His books, written or translated from Sanskrit to Arabic, are considered unique, contributing to a comprehensive understanding of various facets of Hindu life. Al-Biruni's commitment to scholarly exploration and cultural appreciation remains a testament to his enduring legacy.

### 3. Indian festivals in Al-Biruni's 'Kitab al-Hind

"Kitab al-Hind" is a historical work by the Persian scholar Al-Biruni, and it provides insights into various aspects of India, including its festivals. While Al-Biruni focused more on the customs, beliefs, and scientific achievements of India, he did touch upon some festivals. (Yousuf, 2000) Al-Bayruni was singled out when he brought up the topic of Indian feasts. He said that these feasts were known as Zatter festivities, and that women and children made up the bulk of those there. The second day of Jeter in January is dedicated to the Kashmiri feast known as Akdus. The idol of "Pasdu" is swung at the Hindoli Jetter celebration on the eleventh day of the same

month, symbolizing the tradition of swinging him when he was younger. They continue to celebrate in their homes all day long. The eleventh day of Bhadret (June) is the holy feast of Berbet, which is eagerly anticipated by them. Additionally, they scent and beautify kids so that, beginning on the sixteenth day of the month, Karara, they can play with a range of animals. At the end of each week, men change their clothes; at the end of each month, they conduct good deeds, give money to the "Brahmins," and renovate the kids. On Bahnad Eid, women also get dressed up and give gifts to their significant others. On the third day of February, there is another feast, known as Koter, which is reserved for women only. They light lamps, take baths, groom, play with swigs, and bow down to the idol at this hour. A separate feast known as the Herbali is held exclusively for women on June 13. Women decorate plants with flowers and aromatic perfumes on this particular day, get a good night's sleep, take a bath the next day, and then give birth. There's also the feast known as Mahetrij, which is reserved for women only. One of the main idol sites is where ladies congregate in the evening to cook, apply perfumes, take showers in cold water, dress elegantly, donate money in the morning, and provide hospitality. Then, on the twenty-ninth day's evening, everyone makes seven leaps into the water. June's "Kabhet" celebration takes place on the sixth day of the month of Bahadriet. This event will feature food. On the eighth day of the same month, there is another feast called "Droop Har" (paths of Har). During this feast, expectant moms bathe and consume grains in the hopes of protecting their unborn child. Particularly, expectant mothers desire to have sons as children. The "Basent," a springtime feast presented to the Brahmins in February. First day of August is when "Denbally," another feast, takes place. The Indians use betel and leaf for amusement, giving, washing, and trading gifts. During this feast, they graciously light the candles as well. (Shalabi, 2006)

Al-Bayruni extensively documented the diverse feasts of India, emphasizing the Zatter festival, with a focus on celebrations for women and children. In Kashmir, the Akdus feast unfolds on the second day of Jeter (January), accompanied by the Hindoli Jetter feast on the eleventh day of the same month, featuring the swinging of the "Pasdu" idol—a cherished tradition harkening back to the idol's youth. The Berbet festival, a religious celebration, takes center stage on the eleventh day of Bhadret (June). Commencing from the sixteenth day of the month for an entire week, the Karara days witness the adornment of children and charitable acts for the Brahmins, culminating in a week's end when even men partake in personal embellishments. (Dar, 1979) The Bahnad Eid sees women decorating themselves and presenting gifts to their husbands, while the Koter feast on the third day of February is exclusively for women, involving ritualistic body washing and veneration of the "Core" idol, illuminated by candles and scented with perfumes. The Herbali feast on the thirteenth of June is marked by joyous nights, floral offerings, and charitable donations, followed by the Mahetrij feast in November, dedicated to women who gather at revered idol sites, wash with cold water, don luxurious attire, and engage in morning festivities after nighttime ablutions. The Kabhet feast on the sixth day of Bahadriet (June) features food presentations, and the "Droop Har" celebration on the eighth day of the same month involves bathing and grain consumption for the well-being of children, particularly desired for pregnant women seeking sons. Among these

festivities is the spring feast, "Basent," in February, where hospitality is extended to the Brahmins. On the first day of August, the "Denbally" celebration unfolds with ritualistic washing, gift exchanges of betel leaves, and vibrant lamp lighting. While Al-Bayruni extensively covered these Indian festivals, it's noteworthy that he did not delve into Muslim festivities, possibly due to their familiarity or the regions he explored. In addition to festivals, Al-Masoudi provided insights into Indian entertainment, highlighting their musical instruments, love for singing, and affinity for diverse forms of recreation. Chess, introduced by King Belheit, played a transformative role in replacing dice games, emphasizing strategic thinking and categorizing pieces into ranks and degrees. (Hadi, 2015)

These are but a few of the Indian holidays listed by Al-Bayruni; noticeably, he did not include any Muslim holidays. He probably didn't know about them since they were already well-known or because he hadn't visited the Muslim-majority Indian cities. Al-Masoudi provided a distinctive viewpoint on the pleasures and pastimes of the Indians. He went on to state that they perform and sing in a variety of ways and that they enjoy listening to musical instruments. In particular, he mentioned the "kinkala," a one-stringed instrument that is played over a pumpkin-like construction. The "Oud" and the "Cymbal" are both replaced by this instrument. (Sachau, 2000) According to Al-Masoudi, the Indian people have access to a vast range of musical instruments that can make them feel both happy and sad. These instruments provide the maids the ability to get wasted and start singing. Because of this, maids and men alike appreciate this. He took particular attention of the Al-Tibetans since they are great admirers of cabaret, particularly the dancing. They are joyful, friendly people, which is what draws them to this naturally. Even if a loved one passes away, they do not grieve for a long time. Unlike other families, theirs doesn't appear to be a particularly melancholy time. Dice games were one of the other well-known activities and relaxation techniques that Al-Masoudi mentioned. Dice games vanished even after Al-Masoudi made chess popular, but people still loved to roll the dice and believed that luck was the only factor in success. And he recognized the importance of King Belheit's book "The Ways of Ginka," written especially for chess players. He emphasized the importance of playing chess with only seasoned players. To make the game more visually appealing, he also included animated elements that featured human and animal likenesses. He separated the elements into a number of rankings and levels. Al-Masoudi made it very clear that strategy, logic, and innovation are the only factors that matter in the game of chess and that chance has no place in it. Al-Yaqoubi was the only one who understood the meaning of "chess," or "Hasht Rang" in Persian. Though "Hasht" means eight, "Rang" means pardon. Al-Yaqoubi also related the narrative of the origins of the game of chess. King Belhit rejected the theory that planetary motions govern the earth and human lives, so he turned to an Al-Brahmin scholar for guidance. He expressed his concerns about the deteriorating conditions and low social standing of his people. In response, the wise guy proposed that they play a game of chess. Fighting is the only way to distinguish between the assiduous and truthful person and the able and lazy person, according to Al-Yaqoubi and Al-Masoudi, who both agreed that this is the aim of the game's evolution. Everyone in a fight will lose badly if there is no plan.

Al-Masoudi went on to explain that, similar to dice gambling, chess wagers are placed in India on jewels, clothes, and even body parts. If the Indian monarchs disputed over a county or kingdom, according to Al-Tannoukhi, they would play a game of chess, with the winner taking control of the area without using force. The only person to talk about magic in India, however, was Al-Bayruni, who also admitted that it may be employed to hide things that are not what they seem. (Lawrence, 1976) He emphasized that those who maintain and employ this skill are not seen as scientists; rather, it is assumed that they lack knowledge. According to him, the Indian way of thinking is centered on doing good deeds and staying away from evil and harm. Al-Serafi asserted that magicians from Kannauj in particular were particularly adept and cunning in donning masks.

Present-day India, rich with a myriad of festivals, has evolved to integrate traditional customs with modern celebrations, reflecting the nation's cultural tapestry and spirit of unity in diversity. Celebrations like *Diwali*, *Holi*, *Eid*, and *Christmas* showcase India's pluralistic ethos and continue to play a vital role in fostering harmony and communal coexistence. India, with its kaleidoscope of cultures and religions, celebrates a multitude of festivals that reflect its rich heritage. *Diwali*, the Festival of Lights, signifies the triumph of good over evil, while *Holi*, the Festival of Colors, heralds spring and unity. *Navratri* and *Durga Puja* honor the goddess *Durga* with vibrant processions and cultural events. *Eid al-Fitr* and *Eid al-Adha* mark the end of *Ramadan* and commemorate *Ibrahim's* devotion to God, respectively, emphasizing joy, gratitude, and charity. *Ganesh Chaturthi* celebrates the birth of Lord *Ganesh*, and *Raksha Bandhan* strengthens the bond between brothers and sisters. *Onam* in Kerala is a harvest festival filled with feasts and cultural festivities, and these celebrations collectively embody the spirit of togetherness and diversity in India.

#### 4. Conclusion

In the aforementioned article, Abu Rihan Al-Biruni's groundbreaking research, notably encapsulated in his celebrated work "Mullaliand Research," stands as a testament to its acceptance, admiration, and recognition by Indian scientists and the wider populace. Al-Biruni's comprehensive exploration delved into the intricate tapestry of India's material and spiritual culture, addressing pressing issues of the time. Remarkably, he meticulously identified and documented twenty-eight distinct Hindu holidays, each marked by unique observances on specific days and months.

While a millennium has elapsed since Al-Biruni's profound investigations, acknowledging the inevitability of change and progress, it is conceivable that some festivals, once popular in his era, have undergone transformations or faded into obscurity. The ceremonies and celebrations surrounding these festivals may have evolved with the passage of time. However, amidst this dynamic cultural landscape, certain festivals have endured, retaining their original forms as meticulously described in Mulland's research. This enduring cultural connection underscores the resilience and continuity of certain festive traditions. Thus, Al-Biruni's legacy lives on not only in the historical documentation of festivals but also in providing a timeless understanding of the cultural tapestry that weaves together India's rich heritage.



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