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Q12

Persian literary sources of medieval India reflect the spirit of the age. Comment.

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2020 · GS I · 15 marks · World's Physical Geography

Salient features of world's physical geography.

Core demand of the question

- Persian literary sources of medieval India reflect the spirit of the age. Comment
- Keep a 15-mark length

Revision summary

Sultanate and Mughal Persian chronicles, the Ain, and royal memoirs are court archives.

They catch political theology, zabt, and Indo-Persian taste.

Barani, Abul Fazl, and Badauni show an age in argument, not one voice.

Peasants and vernacular piety are under-written.

Read them as a true elite spirit, not as all of medieval India.

Introduction

Persian was the prestige prose of the Sultanate and Mughal courts. Chronicles, insha, akhlaq, and memoirs do reflect the spirit of their age: conquest, agrarianism, Indo-Persian etiquette, and a God-fearing kingship. They also reflect the court more than the village, which is the comment's limit.

Body

What the sources are

- **Court chronicles:** Minhaj's Tabaqat-i Nasiri, Barani's Tarikh-i Firuz Shahi, Isami, and later Abul Fazl's Akbarnama and Ain-i-Akbari.
- **Royal self-writing:** Baburnama (Turki, then Persian circulation) and Jahangir's Tuzuk mix hunting, justice, and taste.
- Sufi malfuzat and premakhyan cousins in Persianate idiom show piety beside the throne.
- Insha manuals and farmans capture the bureaucratic spirit of a paper empire.

Spirit they do catch

- **Political theology:** Barani's advice on the ideal sultan, Abul Fazl's sulh-i-kul and divine light around Akbar, Badauni's orthodox unease - these are the age arguing with itself.
- **Agrarian state:** the Ain's zabt, crops, and prices are the Mughal spirit as revenue, not only as marble.
- **Indo-Persian hybrid:** language, garden, and etiquette show a ruling culture that was neither purely Central Asian nor Sanskritic.

- War, famine, and faction appear because the chronicler needed to explain the king's fortune.

Distortions of the spirit

- Women, peasants, and non-Persian speakers enter as types or tax units. The age of the bazaar and the bhakti street is thinner here than in vernacular sources.
- Patronage made praise a job. Defeat is often God's trial, never the author's party loss.
- Later colonial readers treated these texts as full 'Muslim India'. The spirit they reflect is courtly Persianate India, a real but partial age.

How to comment fairly

- Use Persian sources as a primary window on kingship, fiscal mind, and elite piety.
- Pair them with inscriptions, temple grants, and vernacular poetry to hear the rest of the century.

Flow diagram

Persian texts -> Kingship theology
Persian texts -> Revenue Ain
Persian texts -> Indo-Persian etiquette
Vernacular other -> Fuller age
Persian texts -> Fuller age

Conclusion

Persian literary sources reflect the medieval Indian spirit of court, revenue, and Indo-Persian Islamicate culture with unmatched density. They do not exhaust the age. Comment: indispensable mirror, aristocratic frame.

Facts & figures

Ziauddin Barani

Sultanate historian whose advice literature reveals orthodox political theology.

Ain-i-Akbari

Abul Fazl's gazetteer of Mughal administration, crops, and court.

Baburnama

Founder's memoir that set a taste for observation in the Timurid-Mughal line.

Badauni

Critic of Akbar's experiments, proving the sources contain conflict.

Malfuzat

Sufi conversation texts that record piety beside the chronicle's throne.

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