



# Sidi Ali Reis: A Study of Some Aspects of His Memoir “Mirat-al-Mammalik”

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## Abstract

*Memoirs form an interesting source of study among the gamut of historical sources. These types of histories have their own importance as they considerably differ from the officially sponsored histories. Among such histories is the memoirs of one of the Turkish admirals Sidi Ali Reis entitled as Mirat-ul-Mamalik. It is in Turkish language and was composed during A.D 1553-1556. It provides an account of the adventures of author in the territories of India, Afghanistan, Central Asia and Persia. The author of the memoir is also a representative of the class of official and military dignitaries of the Ottoman Empire. Besides, he was a man of various accomplishments. He was a man of general culture and was in harmony with the prevailing notions of his time. One finds in him a mathematician, astronomer, geographer, poet and theologian. He also provides various details of the maritime affairs of his time. In this paper an attempt has been made to have critical understanding of some of the aspects of life from his memoir. It will have a look into the social, political, military and economic and diplomatic conditions of which the author was a part.*

**Key Words:** Memoir, History, India, Culture, Ottoman Empire.

## Introduction:

Travelling has been an integral part of the human life throughout its existence. Adventure, pilgrimage, knowledge, wars, trade, fortune finding and court patronage, expeditions, to name only few, were some of the forms it took. It was considered as a kind of qualification and whosoever undertook it was accorded a place of great honor. When a travel experience was penned down it just not remained a simple travel but it acquired a different meaning and generated knowledge and information of the regions be it geographical, political, social, economic and cultural. Going through the narrative of the Turkish admiral Sidi Ali Reis one comes across the references of such knowledge and information. Before taking a brief look of such knowledge it would be befitting to have a short overview of his early life and the background or events which led his travels and the composition of his account.

Sidi Ali Reis was born in about 1498 A.D. Nothing much is known about his childhood except that he belonged to a family which had a tradition of navigation in the Black Sea area. His father, Husein Reis, and grandfather had served in the arsenal at Istanbul. Sidi Ali Reis, as a young man, took part in the conquest of Rhodes in 1522 and by 1530s commanded Ottoman operations at Perveze against Andrea Doria. He was then appointed as the chief of the arsenal at Istanbul and the Ottoman Mediterranean fleet. This family background gave him access to the higher authorities of the Ottoman administration and thereby got the higher posts. He was a man of literary tastes as well and composed several works. Before *Mirat-ul Mamalik*, he had written texts on geography, navigation and astronomy like, *Mir'at-i Ka'inat* (Mirror of the World), *Hulasat-ul heye* (The Essence of Astronomy) and the *Kitab ul muhit fi ilm ul eflak ve al ebhar* (Comprehensive book in the Sciences of the Heavens and the Seas). Besides, he composed chronograms and verses. He had command over both the Turkish and Persian poets like Nizami, Hafiz, Sadi and Amir Khusrau. He was also known as *Katib-I Rumi* (The Writer of the West).<sup>1</sup>

There were many travellers during the sixteenth century who visited some parts of present India, Afghanistan, Central Asia and Persia. Sidi Ali Reis, a Turkish army general, was one of them. The background or events which led to the travels of Sidi Ali lies in the expeditions of the Ottomans in the Red Sea and Western Indian Ocean against the Portuguese and for the control of trade. It started in 1506, with the unsuccessful maritime expedition of the Mamluk Sultanate of Egypt. But it served as a precedent to the Ottomans once they made entry into the Red sea in 1516-17.<sup>2</sup> In 1525 the governor of Jiddah, Selman Reis, suggested to the Ottoman sultan about the control of trade into the Red sea by establishing control over the strategic ports in the Western Indian Ocean. However, this suggestion remained unheeded. By 1538, the Ottoman fleet under the governor of Egypt Suleiman Pasha laid an unsuccessful siege of Diu, which had recently come under the Portuguese control. However, he seized Aden and in 1547 and 1552 the Ottomans took Taizz and Sanaa. The Portuguese responded with their attack on the Ottoman port of Suez in 1541.<sup>3</sup>

During the same period in 1534 the Ottomans had conquered Baghdad and in 1546 Basra became a province of the Ottomans. In 1543 Ayaz Pasha, governor of Basra, strengthened the defenses of his port and also occupied Al Hasa on the western shore of the Persian Gulf. In 1552 the Ottomans proceeded to occupy Katif and tried to break the Portuguese blockade at Hurmuz. In this context celebrated Ottoman admiral Piri Reis was sent out in 1552 from Suez at the head of a fleet of thirty vessels. He first occupied Portuguese possession of Masqat. He then plundered Qishm and finally brought his fleet into Basra. Being unable to bring his fleet out of the Gulf due to Portuguese power he returned to Suez in a single ship.<sup>4</sup> But he was executed on the basis of the accusations of bribery. Another rescue effort under Murad Reis for the remaining seventeen vessels also proved a failure. This provided an immediate context

<sup>1</sup> Arminius Vambery, *The Travels and Adventures of the Turkish Admiral Sidi Ali Reis in India, Afghanistan, Central Asia and Persia Durin the Years 1553- 1556*, (London: Luzac & Co., 1899), p. 5.

<sup>2</sup> Muzaffar Alam and Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *Indo-Persian Travels*, p. 95.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p.96.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

for the Sidi Ali Reis to be dispatched to the Persian Gulf in late 1553 and subsequently his absence from the Ottomans heartland until the middle of 1557.

Sidi Ali Reis was designated admiral by the grand vizier Rustam Pasha in late November 1553, when the Sultan was in his winter quarters at Aleppo, preparing for a further campaign against the Safavids. Descending the Tigris via Mosul and Baghdad, he arrived in Basra in February 1554. The governor of Basra Mustafa Pasha welcomed him. After spending several months in Basra and its environs he set sail with fifteen vessels in mid July 1554. He then encountered a Portuguese fleet of some twenty-five vessels and ended fortunately with not much loss.<sup>5</sup> In the early September he had another combat and suffered heavy loss. Adding to this, there was a severe storm which took them as far to the east as Gwadar in Baluchistan. Now left with only nine vessels, his next attempt to return back to Ras al-Hadd was foiled by another frightening tempest and carried him beyond Diu to the coast of Gujarat where he landed at Daman.<sup>6</sup> The unfavorable conditions at sea forced him to take the return journey to Turkey through the lands of India, Afghanistan, Central Asia and Iran. While undergoing his return journey he penned down the various conditions which prevailed in the regions he traversed.

The memoir of Sidi Ali Reis became a subject of interest to scholars and historians from time to time and thereby analyzed differently. Arminius Vambery (1899) glorifies the author's patriotism and militarism. There is also an indication that through his translation of the work he wanted to propagate orientalism though he negates it in his introduction of the work. In 1917 Charles F. Horne took the book as an example of Turkish Islamism. He calls Ottoman Empire as semi-barbaric but praises Sidi Ali's work as "the most valuable piece of early Turkish literature."<sup>7</sup> He also agrees with Arminius Vambery that he was patriotic and loyal to his emperor. Azmi Ozcan (1997), a Turkish historian, in his work *Ottoman Relations with India and Britain* mentions *Mirat-ul Mamalik* as a source for the politics of the late 16<sup>th</sup> century between Eastern states and of conditions of the Muslims outside Arabian and Anatolian homelands. His work also became a tool for explaining Ottoman international affairs in the pre-modern world.<sup>8</sup> To Giancarlo Casale the work reflects the parochial and Ottoman-centric worldview that Rustem strove to promote through his intellectual patronage.<sup>9</sup> He also considered it as the firsthand travel account and a unique source for the political climate of the contemporary Indian Ocean. He also points that this work acted as an initial spark in the formation of the Sokollu Mehmed's very different ideas about the Indian Ocean.<sup>10</sup>

Suraiya Faruqi opines that the work of Sidi Ali Reis was an exercise for his self-defense.<sup>11</sup> He wanted to escape the kind of fate which his predecessor Piri Reis had met with in the court. His mention of the honorable receptions in the foreign courts, loyalty and propagandistic effort for the Ottoman sultan, furnishing of the diplomatic information

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 97.

<sup>6</sup> Muzaffar Alam and Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *Indo-Persian Travels*, pp. 97-100.

<sup>7</sup> Charles F. Horne, introduction to *The Sacred Books and Early Literature of the East*, Vol.6, (New York: Parke, Austin, & Lipscomb, 1917), p. 2.

<sup>8</sup> Azmi Özcan, *Pan-Islamism: Indian Muslims, the Ottomans and Britain, 1877-1924*, (Leiden: Korinklijke Brill, 1997), p. 5.

<sup>9</sup> Giancarlo Casale, *The Ottoman Age of Exploration*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 120.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Suraiya Faruqi, *The Ottoman Empire and the World Around It*, (London: L.B. Tauris, 2004), p. 183.

served his purpose. He was well appreciated and appointed to other offices.<sup>12</sup> Leaving aside all the views and interpretations one should approach this work in terms of contribution to the contemporary literature. Whatever the latent motives of the author would have been it should be treated as a very important source of information about the different facets of the contemporary times. Here I will make an attempt to look into the kind of information it provides us on the political, social, economic, military and diplomatic conditions of that period.

The Memoir of the Turkish admiral can be counted as a uniquely useful source of information about the political climate of the contemporary Indian Ocean and some of the mainland Indian territories. In the middle decades of the sixteenth century it provides a vision of an Indian Ocean world where the struggle was mostly one between the Portuguese and the Ottomans, with all other parties being only of local importance. The Ottoman influence had been established on the Deccan and the western coast of the subcontinent much before the coming of the Mughals.<sup>13</sup>

### **Political conditions:**

In the travel account of Sidi Ali Reis we get some glimpses of the political conditions of the lands which he traversed throughout his return journey to Istanbul. When he reached Daman its governor was Malik Asad, who held his post since the time of the Sultan Ahmed, the ruler of Gujarat. Here due to the fear of the Portuguese the crew of the Sidi Ali scattered. Some joined the service of Malik Asad and some went to Surat by the land route. On reaching the open waters, the Kotwal, Aga Hamsa, brought a letter for Sidi Ali from Imadul-ul-Mulk, the grand Vazier of the Sultan Ahmed. This letter conveyed the message about the dangers of the Portuguese presence at Daman, an open port, and permission for the Turkish party to move to Surat for safety. This intimation coincided with the intentions of Sidi Ali Reis. It took him five days to reach the harbor of Surat from Daman.<sup>14</sup>

The political conditions were unstable in Gujarat, Patan and Sind. The moment Sidi Ali Reis reached Surat he was welcomed by people as a savior from the Portuguese menace. There was a succession dispute after the death of Sultan Bahadur Khan, the ruler of Gujarat. The army had accepted a twelve year young relative of the ruler as his successor. But one of the nobles, Nasir-ul-Mulk, claimed himself as sovereign. He had many followers and had taken over the fortress of Broach, garrisoned it and went to another town. He also took aid from the Portuguese governor of Goa and had promised them that the ports of Daman, Surat, Broach, Katbaye, Somnat, Minglur, and Furmeyan would be opened for them.<sup>15</sup> Sultan Ahmed took 200 hundred gunners from the troops of Sidi Ali Reis and marched towards Broach. Those who were left behind were attacked by the Portuguese from Goa, Diu, Shiyul, Besai and Pravodar. There were also attempts by Nasir ul Mulk to get Sidi Ali killed by the aid of some murderers. Meanwhile, Sultan Ahmed had taken the stronghold of Broach and sent his two officers Khudaband and Jahangir back to Surat. He himself went to quell a revolt at Ahmedabad. With the death of Nasir ul Mulk Sultan Ahmed ascended the throne again and peace was restored in Gujarat. The Portuguese had also sent an envoy to Khudaband and while in the court

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Naimur Rahman Farooqi, *Mughal Ottoman Relations: A Study of Political & Diplomatic Relations between Mughal India and the Ottoman Empire, 1556-1748*, (Delhi: Idarah-I Adabiyat-I Delhi, 2009), p. 11.

<sup>14</sup> Arminius Vambery, *The Travels and Adventures of the Turkish Admiral*, p. 25.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 27.

he also pressed for the surrender of Sidi Ali Reis.<sup>16</sup> In Patan again made to embroil Sidi Ali and his party in a dispute between the two rival parties, Sher Khan and Musa Khan on the one hand and Baluch Khan, the ruler of Radanpur, on the other.

### **Social groups:**

In Gujarat he mentions about the social groups like the banians, brahmins, rajputs and the tribe of the Bats. The Rajputs were hostile to Sidi Ali and his party and troubled him in the course of his journey as he mentions in his travel account. The Bats were integrally connected with trade. They escorted the merchants and the travellers from one place to another on a small amount. Two bats were provided to the Turkish party who escorted them up to Parkar. This is one of the rare ethnographic observations which Sidi Ali Reis produces in his text.<sup>17</sup> There was some population of Circassian (Memluks) inhabitants in Gujarat. They had their own chiefs or Sardars. There was a fight among them and one person was murdered. Sidi Ali was requested to solve the case.<sup>18</sup> He first replied that the Laws of Ottoman lands had no force in the lands of Gujarat. But on the insistence of the soldiers he pronounced the decision in favor of retaliation.<sup>19</sup> Sidi Ali also mentions about the practice of Sati in Gujarat. It was practiced by the Banians in Gujarat and the Hindus in the Hindustan.<sup>20</sup> If the wife cannot bear children she was not burnt. But if she could remarry they burnt her willy-nilly. If the women burned of her own will her relatives rejoiced and played string instruments.<sup>21</sup>

### **Military Conditions:**

Sidi Ali's account also reflects on the kind of the military culture prevalent at that time. This was a kind of military culture in which a person of talent and skills could be recruited without the consideration of the region one came from. Even persons belonging to the enemy's lands were recruited as per the military needs and requirements. One also comes across the references to various weapons which were used in the sea warfare. There were many weapons which were used in the sea battles like cannons and guns, arrows and swords, *badjoalushka*, javelins and stones. If there were the local Arabs recruited in the army of the Portuguese, there is also no dearth of the references of Portuguese as soldiers in the Egyptian army.

The strong army was an important arm of the medieval states to conquer and consolidate its rule over the subjugated territories. The army of the Ottoman Turkey was quite disciplined and well equipped with weapons of warfare. The Ottoman Turks were considered experts in the use of firearms. They were famous as expert gunners and musketeers

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 28.

<sup>17</sup> Muzaffar Alam, p. 107.

<sup>18</sup> Arminius Vambery, *The Travels and Adventures of the Turkish Admiral*, p. 29.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 59.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 60. See also Muzaffar Alam and Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *Indo-Persian Travels*, p. 119.

and were generally employed as artillery men.<sup>22</sup> This was one of the reasons that the party of the Turkish admiral was welcomed by the various local rulers and to secure their help against their opponents.

### **Economic conditions:**

Although there is not so much mentioned about the economic conditions of the regions visited by the Turkish admiral. Yet some information about the coastal trade could also be retrieved from the text. He saw the junks in the harbor of the port of Daman. These junks belonged to the Samiri, the ruler of Calicut.<sup>23</sup> The efforts of the Ottomans to dismantle the Portuguese restrictions on trade are narrated in the travels. In this connection the Ottoman Emperors and their governors dispatched several fleets into the Indian Ocean and the Persian Gulf.

The commercial connections with the Ottomans territories had been accorded a place of high importance by the sultanate of Gujarat. It becomes quite evident from the reply of Imad-ul-Mulk to the Portuguese envoy when he refused to hand over Sidi Ali Reis to him.<sup>24</sup>

Moreover, the narrative also brings forth important evidence about the trading connections from the Ottoman territories to as far as China. The conversation of the Turkish admiral with the merchants Khodja Bashi and Kara Hasan points to the presence of Turkish merchants, accompanied with the influence of Turkish Emperor, in Gujarat and as far as China.<sup>25</sup>

The two communities concerned with the trading activities also find a mention in the memoir of Sidi Ali i.e. the Banians and the Bats (Bhatts). The first category was not only involved in the trade but also acted as the bankers and moneylenders. They were present not only in India but also in the countries beyond the boundaries of India. The second category as mentioned in the account was a tribe and whose job was to escort the traders and travellers from one place to another.<sup>26</sup> They guaranteed the safety of the caravan on a small amount and had a peculiar tradition of defense against the robbers.

### **Diplomatic conditions:**

Sidi Ali's travels certainly have a strong diplomatic component. There are indirect references to the diplomatic relations among the rulers of Egypt, Gujarat and Calicut. To combat and remove the Portuguese hold on the sea waters and free the trade these rulers helped each other in the wars against the Portuguese. The captains of the ships of the Samiri, ruler of Calicut, met Sidi Ali Reis at Daman and brought a letter which mentioned that Samiri was in constant war with the Portuguese and expected an Egyptian fleet under the guidance of the pilot Ali. The fleet was expected to put the Portuguese on flight.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Naimur Rahman Farooqi, *Mughal Ottoman Relations*, p.11.

<sup>23</sup> Arminius Vambery, *The Travels and Adventures of the Turkish Admiral*, p. 24.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. 32.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p. 52.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p. 34.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p. 24.

The year 1556 marks the beginning of the diplomatic relationship between the Mughal and the Ottoman States when Emperor Humayun (1530-1556) wrote his first and last letter to the Ottoman Sultan. The admiral after spending some months in Gujarat and other places reached the court of Humayun. He was very well received as per the courtly manners. Bairam Khan along with the four hundred elephants and some thousand men were dispatched to receive him. He was offered some money and the district of Kharcha as jagir but he declined to accept it.<sup>28</sup>

In the narrative we also find that the Turkish admiral during his stay in the Mughal court at Delhi tried to make an impression of and a sense of obedience towards the Ottoman sultan over the Mughal emperor on the basis of what Muzaffar Alam calls as the geographical logic.<sup>29</sup> Being asked about the vastness of the Turkish Empire he replied that the territories of the Turkish Padishah were as large as were of Alexander the Great.<sup>30</sup> The assertions of Sidi Ali had the requisite influence upon the Mughal emperor and leading him to say to the assembled nobles in his court that the only ruler to have the right to be called as Padishah is only the Ottoman sultan. However, Muzaffar Alam doubts the authenticity of the statement and attributes it to the rhetoric of Sidi Ali's narrative.<sup>31</sup> Later researches show that it was on the Emperor Humayun who showed the conciliatory policy towards the Ottoman Khilafat. Babur and later Akbar onwards till Aurangzeb the Mughal rulers ignored the Khilafat claims of the Ottoman sultans.<sup>32</sup>

Sidi Ali Reis also mentions that he had acted as a mediator between sultan Mahmud of Bakkur and the Emperor Humayun. It was on his suggestion that the Mughal emperor agreed to make an agreement with sultan Mahmud and he entrusted this task upon him.<sup>33</sup> A document was prepared and duly signed by Emperor Humayun, was sent to sultan Mahmud. Both sultan Mahmud and his Vazier Mulla Yari thanked to the Turkish admiral in a private letter which he showed to the emperor.<sup>34</sup>

One thing which is very strong in the whole narrative is the desire of the Turkish admiral to reach his native land and to show the prestige and the transcendent influence of the Ottoman Sultan. He tried his best to avoid the delays but the conditions in the lands which he chose for his return journey was such that he was somehow caught into them. He also declined the posts and jagirs which were offered to him by many rulers of Gujarat, Sind and the Mughal Emperor. This reflects the patriotic feelings the Turkish admiral had for his native land. The height of his patriotic feelings could be gauged by his statement that "on the surface of the earth, there is not even one land (*Vilayet*) comparable to Rum, nor one another Padishah who is equal to the (Ottoman) Padishah, Refuge of the World."<sup>35</sup>

### Conclusion:

In conclusion we can say that the memoir of the Sidi Ali Reis occupies an important place as a source of information on the political, social, economic and diplomatic history of the contemporary times. The work also provides

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p. 47.

<sup>29</sup> Muzaffar Alam and Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *Indo-Persian Travels*, p. 113.

<sup>30</sup> Arminius Vambery, *The Travels and Adventures of the Turkish Admiral*, p. 51.

<sup>31</sup> Muzaffar Alam and Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *Indo-Persian Travels*, p. 114.

<sup>32</sup> Naimur Rahman Farooqi, *Mughal-Ottoman Relations*, p. 199.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Quoted by Muzaffar Alam and Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *Indo-Persian Travels*, p. 115.

interesting information on geography, flora and fauna, shrines of Sufi saints and poets. Although interesting, these aspects are not discussed in this paper. Besides, the journey and experiences in the lands of Afghanistan, Central Asia and Iran by Sidi Ali have also been skipped. This could form a part of a separate study. There is a layer of rhetoric in the narrative which a critical reader should take note of. This could be seen in his claims of influence and obedience of the Ottoman sultan outside the Turkish lands. He also exaggerates in his verses the importance of his homeland in the form of his patriotic feelings. However, these claims could be guarded and corrected by studying the other contemporary sources comparatively.

