

An Avadhi language account of an earthquake in medieval North India circa AD 1500

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An account of the earthquake which occurred circa AD 1500 at Jais, Uttar Pradesh, India by the medieval Sufi poet Jaisi, is pointed out as a contribution to the database on the earthquake history of India.

A collection of reliable Indian historical records is important for writing an earthquake history of India. This is needed to form proper estimates of seismicity of any region of the country as well as to form a realistic idea of possible earthquake hazards.

Recently, Iyengar and his colleagues have tried to systematically look for earlier historical earthquakes in the medieval period¹. They have made use of Sanskrit records from Kashmir, Ahom records for Assam and Persian records for the rest of India.

The purpose of the present note is to add an Avadhi language account of an earthquake which took place in the 15th century North India.

Jaisi's account of the earthquake

Malik Muhammad Jaisi was a Sufi poet of distinction. He hailed from the town of Jais, presently in Raebareli District, Uttar Pradesh (UP), India. Jaisi died at a place 3 km north of Ramnagar, near Amethi, not too far from Jais. His tomb is located there. The town of Jais has paid homage to its great poet by erecting a Jaisi memorial.

Jaisi wrote in Avadhi, a language spoken in Avadh region, UP, which is a part of the wider Hindi belt. Avadhi has been regarded as a dialect of Hindi generally so far, but now some people like to consider it as a separate language. Jaisi's main poetical work is the epic *Padmāvata*. It is one of the two best-known epics of early Hindi, the other one being the well-known *Rāma Carita Mānasa* of Tulsidas, which was written later. *Padmāvata* is justly regarded as a glory of Hindi literature.

The account of the earthquake by Jaisi occurs in the fourth verse of his poem *Ākhiri Kalām*, which contains in all 60 verses and gives an Islamic religious account of the end of the world. This book was written in 936 of Al-Hijra era during

the reign of the Moghul Emperor Babar. The text of the verse, as given in the standard collected works of Jaisi, edited by Ramachandra Shukla², is as follows:

भा औलार मोर नौ सटी । तीस बरौस ऊपर कबि बटी ॥
आवत उधत-धार विधि खना । भा भूकप जगत अकुलना ॥
धरती दीन्क चक्र-विधि लाई । धिरे अकस रहैट के नाई ॥
धिरि पहर मेदिनि तस हला । जस घाला घननी भरि घाला ॥
भिरित-लोक ज्यो रघा हिडोला । सरन पलास पयन-बट होला ॥
धिरि पहर परबत डहि गप । सात समुद्र कीच धिति भए ॥
धरती फाटि, छत महरानी । पुनि भइ भया जौ तिहि समानी ॥
जो अस बभन्क पाइ के, सहस जीम गरिराई ।
सो अस कीन्क मुहमद, तोहि अस यपुरे काई ॥4॥

A rough translation conveying the sense of the passage would be as follows: 'I was born in "nava sadi" and after the passage of thirty years, I became a poet An earthquake happened then and the world was in a turmoil. The ground turned like a wheel The hills, mountains and the earth rocked, rocked just like grains in a sieve. The land of living became a ferris wheel. The heaven and the underworld moved like an aerial chair. The hills and mountains fell down; seven seas were churned into mud. The ground split Even mountains, which support the earth, shook.'

So a severe earthquake coincided with the birth event of Jaisi.

Date of the earthquake

The earthquake was felt in Jais. The meaning of the phrase 'nava sadi' is crucial to fix the date of this earthquake. As Shukla mentions, the line of the poem containing this phrase is obscure and hard to interpret. Literally, 'nava' means nine and 'sadi' means century. Shukla takes this phrase to mean the year 900 of Al-Hijra era to be the birth year of Jaisi². However, the phrase has also been taken to mean that Jaisi was born in the 9th century of the Al-Hijra era³. Which of these interpretations is more likely? Could it even be taken to refer to the years of the Al-Hijra era, beginning with the year 900? We will now discuss this.

Jaisi started writing the epic *Padmāvata* in either 927 AH or 947 AH. The am-

biguity is because these two dates are given in Persian script and can be confused with each other. However, as Shukla mentions, a Bengali translation of the epic by the poet Alo Ujalo, written around AD 1650 has been found, which gives the reading 927 AH unambiguously². However, Jaisi praises Shershah, the emperor at that time in the book, who ascended the throne in 947 AH. According to Shukla, the poet started writing the epic in 927 AH, but completed it only after 947 AH, during the reign of Shershah. On the other hand, other scholars have preferred the date 947 AH for the writing of *Padmāvata*. Jaisi's realistic description of old age in the book, which appears to be autobiographical, is also to be considered in this context.

Since the author wrote his book *Ākhiri Kalām* in AD 936, if we consider that he became a poet after he was more than thirty years of age, following the entire Jaisi scholarship, then his birth year could be plausibly taken as either 900 AH or a few years before that. This would also be consistent with his attaining old age in 947 AH.

It only remains to convert the date 900 AH into our present Gregorian calendar dates. Talbot⁴ in his English translation of the *Baburnama (Memoirs of Babur)*, gives it as follows.

900 AH = AD 2 October 1494 –
AD 21 September 1495.

Thus the date of the earthquake is quite likely to be in the decade ending in AD 1495.

There is, however, no known historical record of an earthquake in northern India in various such compilations during this period. There is a well-attested, magnitude 8 earthquake in the North Indian plains^{1,5}, felt at Delhi and Agra, in 911 AH, i.e. on AD 6 July 1505. This earthquake was even felt by Babar in Kabul⁴. Could the Jaisi earthquake be the same as this one? In this case we will have to disagree

with standard Jaisi chronology. All the same, let us pursue it a little further. If Jaisi is taken to be born in 911 AH, then he would not have been more than 30 years of age in 936 AH. Thus the phrase 'tees baris upar' will have to mean not 'more than thirty years since birth', but 'more than thirty years in the current Al-Hijra century'. This is something which no Jaisi scholar has so far surmised. Even if the date of *Padmavāta* is taken to be 947 AH, he would be only 35 years of age, inconsistent with a possible old age of Jaisi at that time. We will have to contend that may be Jaisi started the book in 947 AH, but finished it much later in his old age.

We thus reach the conclusion that either (i) the Jaisi earthquake took place in 900 AH or in the decade preceding it, i.e.

during the decade ending in AD 1495. In this case it would be a record of a previously unknown earthquake, or (ii) Jaisi chronology needs serious modification and the earthquake described by Jaisi is the same as that which took place in 911 AH (on AD 6 July 1505). In this case Jaisi's description would provide another account of a well-known historical earthquake from northern India.

1. Iyengar, R. N., Sharma, D. and Siddiqui, J. M., *Indian J. Hist. Sci.*, 1999, **34**, 181–237 and references therein.
2. Shukla, R. (ed.), *Jāyasi Granthāvali*, Nagri Pracharini Sabhā, Varanasi (reprint of 2025 V.S.), 1968–69, 2nd edn.
3. See the website www.kavyakosh.com for its entry on Jaisi.

4. Talbot, F. G., *Memoirs of Babur*, 1909. Since this book is extremely rare, we quote the information from its Hindi translation. *Bābarnāmā*, trans. by Yugajit Navalapuri, Sahitya Academy, New Delhi, 1996, reprint, p. 41.
5. Rajendran, C. P. and Rajendran, K., *Technophysics*, 2005, **395**, 19–39.

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