

---

## ADMINISTRATION IN THE DELHI SULTANATE: A HISTORICAL ANALYSIS

**Dr. Sartaj Shabbar Rizvi**

Associate Professor, Department of History, Shia P.G. College, Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh

### ABSTRACT

*The Delhi Sultanate lasted for a period of 320 years from AD 1206 to 1526. This period of three hundred twenty years was shared by the Mamluks or slaves, Khiljis, Tughlaks, Sayyads and Lodis, of the Mamluk dynasty, the most important rulers are Iltutmish and Balban, while Alauddin Khilji was the most important; of the Tughlak line the most important are Muhammad bin Tughlak and Ferozshah Tughlak and of the Lodis the important one is Ibrahim Lodi. Timur invaded India and destroyed Delhi during this period towards the end of 15th century.*

*The Delhi Sultanate in its existence of more than three centuries gave birth to political, social and economic institutions which differed from the earlier ones. Yet these institutions represent a unique combination of the Turkish and the earlier Indian institutions. The contact between the Turks and the Indians led to two major processes of military conflict and commercial activity along with cultural transactions. The paper will discuss the central, provincial and local administration in Delhi Sultanate.*

### INTRODUCTION

After the death of Muhammad of Ghor, Aibak declared independence and established the Delhi Sultanate in AD 1206. The Delhi Sultanate lasted for a period of 320 years from AD 1206 to 1526. This period of three hundred twenty years was shared by the Mamluks or slaves, Khiljis, Tughlaks, Sayyads and Lodis, of the Mamluk dynasty, the most important rulers are Iltutmish and Balban, while Alauddin Khilji was the most important; of the Tughlak line the most important are Muhammad bin Tughlak and Ferozshah Tughlak and of the Lodis the important one is Ibrahim Lodi. Timur invaded India and destroyed Delhi during this period towards the end of 15th century.

The Delhi Sultanate in its existence of more than three centuries gave birth to political, social and economic institutions which differed from the earlier ones. Yet these institutions represent a unique combination of the Turkish and the earlier Indian institutions. The contact between the Turks and the Indians led to two major processes of military conflict and commercial activity along with cultural transactions.

There were mutual hostility on account of cultural differences and conflicting political interests and partial assimilation and acculturation as a result of realization that they have to coexist as neighbors because the invading Turks made India their new home. There is also a debate about the causes for the success of the Turks.

While the contemporary chronicles view their success as the 'Will of God', the British historians hold the view that the invading armies consisted of war-like tribes with better horses and better arms and the Indians were pacifists by nature and were not given to war. This view is disproved by the fact that the Indians were not lacking in bravery and martial spirit. Some Indian historians attribute the success of Turks to the peculiar social structure created by Islam.

There are many causes for the defeat of the Indians, chief of them the superior military technology and fighting skills of the Turks. They were also helped by 'lack of unity of command' among the army of the Indians. The use of iron stirrups and horse shoes reinforced the striking power and stamina of the Arab cavalry.

The horse-shoes provided greater mobility to the horses and the stirrups gave the soldiers a distinct advantage. We may conclude that the Turks were successful primarily due to their military technology and that the armies of the Indian rulers lacked unity of command as they were under the control of regional local lords or feudatories of doubtful loyalties, their greatest weakness.

The Turkish occupation of India brought about far reaching changes in the polity, society and economy of India. Though changes introduced by them were far reaching, the basic structure remained the same with some necessary modifications. First, let us take up polity or political process of the Delhi Sultanate. Before we go into details of the structure and nature of the polity,

it is essential to have an idea of the Islamic theory of society. After the death of Prophet Mohammad, the institution of the Caliphate came into existence and gradually took shape.

Khalifa was considered the head of the Muslim community or Umma or Ummat. In Islamic world view, the Khalifa combined in himself the duty of the guardian of religion and the upholder of the political order. In the early Islamic world, there was no provision for a head of the State like Sultan, as Khalifa was vested with that authority.

In theory the Khalifa was the head of the Islamic community but in reality with the decline of the stature of Khalifa in due course of time the emergence of Sultan as independent powerful sovereign over a certain geographical area became a fact. But as the institution of Khalifa survived though only in a theoretical and formal sense, it became necessary to obtain legitimization of political authority of the Sultan by granting of titles, allowing the name of the Caliph inscribed on coins and reading of Khutba in Friday prayer. By this the Sultan obtained legitimacy for his authority and developed a link with the Islamic world.

Further, the Delhi Sultans in theory recognized the supremacy of the Islamic law or Shariath but in reality they did not hesitate to deviate from Shariath. Political expediency prevailed over dogmatic approach in the conduct of the Suhans. Satish Chandra aptly remarks that the Turks evolved a number of new institutions and concepts which led to a centralization of power so far unknown in India.

The institution of monarchy has no place in Shariath and it was not an Islamic institution. The original concept of government in Islam was that of the Imam who was chosen by the faithful, who led a simple and austere life and combined in himself both political and spiritual authority. The disintegration of the Abbasid Caliphate was responsible for the emergence of the institution of Sultan.

In course of time, the Sultan became all powerful. As he became the source of honour and patronage, he claimed divine attributes. Like the Hindus, the Islamic thinkers also made the office of the Sultan divine. Barauni writes that the heart of a monarch was a mirror of God and it reflected the wishes of God so that the actions of the King Sultan could not be questioned.

Balban was the first of the Delhi Sultans, who assumed the title of Zill Allah or Shadow of God and introduced the ceremonies of Sijda and Pabos (prostration on the ground, bending down to touch one's feet). The Shariath allows these practices only for Allah but no one else. The Delhi Sultans though appear to be exercising unlimited power cannot be considered absolute despotic rulers.

Was the state governed by the Sultans of Delhi and Mughal emperors theocratic, purely based on Shariath? This aspect has attracted the attention of the modern scholars of history. The Islamic law stipulates that the entire world is divided into Dar-ul-harb or abode of war and Dar-ul-Islam or abode of Islam.

Idolaters have no place in an Islamic country and they are to be killed or enslaved. But this canonical law could not be implemented in India as the non-Muslim population was in majority and it is impossible to enslave or convert all idolaters in India. Yet, there is a strong belief that the medieval state under the Muslim rule was definitely a theocracy, as it had the essential elements; the sovereignty of God and Government by the direction of God through Ulemas or the priestly group in accordance with divine law.

The Sultans of Delhi considered themselves as deputies or assistants of Calipha who was God's vice-regent. Though the Delhi Sultans recognized the supremacy of the Islamic Laws, they had to supplement them by framing non-religious regulations (Zawabti) too. It indicates that for all practical purposes, the medieval state and sultan cared more for the stability and security of the young state rather than blind implementation of Shariath. We can say that the needs of the emergent state influenced the policies and practices not always consistent with the Islamic laws.

To prove this point, we have the example of Sultan Iltutmish, when Shafai Muslim divines enjoined him to enforce the Islamic law strictly, i.e., giving the Hindus the option of Islam or death, his Wazir, Junaidi replied the Muslims are now like salt in a dish of food. We have also the evidences of Alauddin Khilji and Muhammad bin Tughlak who did not accept the authority of the Ulemas. Jalaluddin Khilji, the founder of the Khilji dynasty, being a pious Muslim considered as unrealistic the policy of forcible conversion of the Hindus or their humiliation as demanded by some theologians and also defended the policy of allowing Hindus to worship idols, preach their beliefs and observe practices which were considered the hallmark of infidelity according to the Quran.

He also put forward the concept of a new type of state, one which was based fundamentally on the goodwill and support of the people of all communities and one which was basically benevolent and looked after the welfare of its subjects. Alauddin Khilji's statement, "I do not know what is lawful or unlawful according to Shariath, whatever I consider necessary for the state or for its welfare, I decree" also is an example to indicate that Shariath is not implemented in toto.

These instances prove that, in practice the Turkish state was not theocratic but evolved according to its special needs of the state which were paramount. Yet there are instances when the ruler gave importance to observance of Shariath strictly as in the reign of Ferozshah Tughlak.

One of the despicable instances of bigotry on the part of Ferozshah Tughlak was public burning of a Brahmin on the ground that he openly performed idol worship at his house in which both Hindus and Muslims participated and that he had converted a Muslim woman. Ferozshah even collected Zizia from Brahmins, who were exempted till then. He was so dogmatic that he imposed this also against Muslims who adhered to Sufism.

While Muhammad bin Tughlak took measures to create a composite ruling class consisting of Muslims and Hindus. Ferozshah reversed the same by giving importance to orthodox elements of

Islam. Later, Lodis once again revived the practice of composite administrative machinery, which was taken to its logical end by Akbar. The Sultanate of Delhi had to face a number of political and administrative obstacles which created a crisis and then a decline. The Sultans did not find it smooth sailing to conquer, expand and consolidate their power.

The Sultans had to face opposition from the indigenous Hindu rulers, conflict between the nobility and the Sultan and threat from Mongols besides the rise of regional kingdoms. In course of time, the Sultanate had to decline because as long as the Sultan could contain opposition, suppress rebellion and keep his flock together the kingdom survived, but when weak rulers ascended the throne, then came decline of the Sultanate. This is apparent since the success of monarchical system depends on the king's personality and individual qualities of leadership and ability to grasp the needs and requirements of the moment.

While in the earlier ages, the law of primogeniture was accepted, no clear and well-defined law of succession prevailed in the age of the Sultanate. Though the hereditary principle was accepted, no strict adherence to that principle was observed. Consequently, in a way, law of jungle or Darwinism prevailed, where anyone with the sharpest sword and the strongest desire could claim the throne by offering bribes or by treachery. As and when a ruler died, intrigues and strife became very common which shook the foundations of royalty. The nobles or Umra played a crucial role in the constructive and destructive activities of the Sultanate.

The nobles always tried to manipulate the situation to obtain economic and political gains. This led to uncertainty and a sort of anarchical situation as there were divisions supporting and opposing the claimant to the throne. Further, the rise of regional states under the Bahmanis in AD 1347 and the rise of the kingdoms like Jaunapur, Malwa and Gujarat respectively under Khwaja Jahan in 1394, Dilawar Khan in 1401 and Zabar Khan in 1407, weakened the Sultanate as the Sultans lost the fertile regions of Bengal, Malwa, Jaunapur and Gujarat and their revenue to the State.

By the first decade of the 16th century the effective control of the Sultanate became nominal and the Sultanate came on the verge of collapse in the hands of a determined aggressor with minimum effort. The assaults of the Mongols at regular intervals further sapped the vitality of the Sultanate, but it appears that the Mongol forays did not affect the Sultan's political and economical fortunes.

### **Central Administration:**

The Sultan took the help of a number of ministers in performing his task as a ruler. We have no definite idea about the number of ministers employed by the Sultan and there was no council of ministers. The ministers were appointed by the Sultan and they remained in office as long as they enjoyed the confidence of the Sultan. We come across four ministers designated; the Wazir, Ariz-i-mamlik, Diwan-i-Insha and Diivan-i-Risalat. We also come across officers known as Wakil-i-dar, Amir Hazib, Barid-i-Khas and many more minor officials to execute the orders issued by their superiors.

### **Provincial Administration:**

The provincial and local administration was only nominal. It is because the Sultans of Delhi were less successful in consolidating an empire comprising a large part of India. Though they had the military strength required to do so, they were not successful in establishing an administrative set-up which could penetrate deep into the countryside and strengthen their control.

The Sultan had to be invariably dependent on the alien nobility through the bondage of Islam as in the past too the ruling elite of different parts of India depended on their Samantas or feudal lords. None of Sultans, except Alauddin, could succeed in penetrating into the rural sector by introducing a direct revenue assessment with a view to subdue the Hindu middlemen, but he could gain partial success only in the core area of his region. Even if Alauddin attempted this in provinces, it could have boomeranged as the provincial lords did not like to be cowed down.

The Sultan's scheme of satisfying those who helped them in conquest, by granting feudal fiefs or Iqtas, though beneficial to the Sultanate in the initial stages, in the long run the exclusivity of alien nobles impeded the administrative reach deep into the rural areas. Further, the aloofness of the

ruling elite was as an obstacle in integration of the political system. Besides their aloofness, their emphasis on conversions to some extent and the excesses committed by some Sultans was mainly responsible for the Sultanate's failure to extend their effective control into the deep interior of the subcontinent.

In a way the Sultanate accelerated the process of political unification and can be considered as the precursor of a nation state, which has been our cherished ideal. In theory, the Delhi Sultanate appears to be a unitary state but in actuality it was a confederation of semi-independent territorial units ruled by military chiefs or governors.

The administrative organization of the Sultanate was a composite structure. The age-old local institutions such as village and caste councils continued. Further, on these the Sultans superimposed certain measures like the system of taxation and law of succession which are not in conformity with the law of the faith. While their monarchy was fashioned on the Persian tradition, their army was organized on Turko-Mongol system.

#### **Local Administration:**

The Sultans divided their kingdom into provinces but the hold of the Sultan appears to be nominal as every governor behaved as an autonomous one. The provinces were again divided into Shiqs and Paraganas which were placed under the Shiqdars and Amib. In that period Paragana was the smallest unit of administration. The provinces were called Iqtas. The number of Iqtas varied and there was no uniformity in the administration of the Iqtas. The head of the Iqta was called Naib, Sultan, Nazim, Mukti or Wall. During the period of Alauddin Khilji, Iqtas were divided into two categories as those under the Delhi Sultanate from the beginning and which were subsequently brought under the control of Alauddin Khilji.

Besides the Iqtas, there also existed tribute paying states of South India who acknowledged the sovereign power of the Sultan. Each Iqta had besides Mukti, number of officers of central government. A Wazir, znAriz and a Quaji in each Iqta were also placed as representatives of the central government. The smallest unit of administration was the village which was administered



by local hereditary officers and the Panchayat of the village. The Chaudaii, the Patuari, the Khur, the Chaukidar and the Muqdam were the hereditary officers of the village who helped the government in the collection of revenue but they lost these privileges during the reign of Alauddin Khilji.

The Panchayat of the village looked after education, sanitation, etc., and acted as a judicial body also. There is a controversy regarding Sultans' attitude towards their Hindu and Muslim subjects. One view holds that the Delhi Sultans pursued a policy of discrimination among the Hindu peasants; the Muslim peasants paid less revenue. The Hindu traders paid double trade tax and the Muslim traders paid less tax.

Even among the Muslims, the Indian Muslims and converted Muslims were treated lowly and only foreign Muslims enjoyed higher status and the Hindus were treated as second rate citizens, experiencing hardships. What was narrated above was the view of the traditional historians who believed that the Muslim rule was based on the Islamic law but a section of the modern historians argued that the Sultan's policies are not determined by religious considerations but by economic interests.

This view is questioned on the ground that the medieval period was period of faith and the faith of the rulers motivated them to be bigoted in their approach. As a general rule all the Sultans can be considered as bigots and it is true that some are really bigoted compared to the rest and on the basis of that we cannot say that the Muslim rule was full of conversion from Hinduism to Islam.

The occupation and the establishment of the Delhi Sultanate initiated changes in the economic structure as well as the general political structure of India. Though they were aware of and conversant with well defined concepts and practices of tax collection, the structure, distribution system and minting of coinage, in the beginning they superimposed their ideas on the existing system and slowly and gradually introduced modifications up to the end of the 15th century.

The slave labour played a crucial role in providing the accustomed luxurious life to the nobility, depending on their taste and habits. Muhammad Habib holds that the economic changes that occurred during this period created an organization considerably superior to that which existed prior to their occupation. Habib further states that the changes in economic sphere were so drastic that they deserve the designation of urban and rural revolutions.

D.D. Kosambi argues that the Islamic raiders intensified already existing elements of feudalism in the subcontinent. The Sultans after bringing new areas under their occupation divided the new areas among the commanders who were allowed to plunder and extract tribute from the defeated and subjugated rural lords. The commanders paid salaries to the members of army in cash.

Land revenue was the major source for the resource base of the state. The Sultans introduced a mechanism for simultaneous collection and distribution of revenue. In this period the Iqta system combined the twin functions of revenue collection and distribution. It did not endanger the unity of the political structure.

The Mukti is authorized to collect land tax and other taxes due to the state and had to maintain troops; and to provide them to the state at the time of need. It is a transferable job. The territory from which the Sultan collected tax directly and deposited in his own treasury is called Khalisa, only core area of the Sultan, i.e., the territory around Delhi and parts of Doab remained in Khalisa. The area under Khalisa shifted from time to time depending on the success of the Sultan in expanding his territorial gains. While Alauddin paid cash to his soldiers, Iltutmish, Balban and the Tughlaks assigned land or villages to soldiers in lieu of salaries. Such assignments were called Wajh and its holders as Wajhadars. These were permanent and hereditary appointments. Balban, by appointing Khwaja or accountant, started streamlining the tax collected by Iqta holder.

Alauddin Khilji also brought Iqta under the preview of the central finance department or Diwan-i-Wijarat. The central intervention reached its climax during the time of Muhammad bin Tughlak. By the time we come to Lodis, the administrative changes and revenue assignments were combined

together, instead of Iqtas, we now come across terms like Paraganas or Sarkars. By the time of Sikandar Lodi, we notice sub-infeudation in these areas. The Sultans also made land grants to Darghas, mosques, Madarsas and they are called Milk, Idrar and Inam. The land tax in Islamic tradition was called Kharaj but till the time of Alauddin Khilji no serious attempt appears to have been made to streamline the assessment and realization of Kharaj.

Alauddin aimed at increasing the revenue collection by enhancing the demand and also introduced direct collection to cut down the outflow due to intermediaries. The system of tax collection introduced by Alauddin continued till the time of Ghiyasuddin Tughlak who modified and expected the Khots and Muqqaddams from paying tax on their cultivation and cattle. Muhammad bin Tughlak extended this system of Alauddin Khilji to Gujarat, Malwa, Deccan, South India and Bengal. He introduced new imposts and collected taxes very rigorously.

He was the first Sultan to contemplate formulation of an agricultural policy. He introduced the practice of providing agricultural loans called Sondhar for increasing the area under cultivation and to dig wells for irrigation purposes. It is estimated that Muhammad bin Tughlak spent a huge amount as Sondhar, but only a small amount of it reached the peasantry. He created a new ministry designated Diwan-i-atnir-i-Kohi to promote agriculture. The two main functions of this ministry were to extend area under cultivation and reclaim the land that was out of cultivation, and efforts were also made to improve the cropping pattern.

Muhammad bin Tughlak's time saw sugarcane being replaced by grapes and dates; wheat was given up for sugarcane. Though in theory all these plans were good, in practice they did not yield the necessary result and his successor Ferozshah replaced all these measures. Alauddin Khilji also introduced measures to regulate the prices of all the essential commodities in the market. He not only fixed prices of the commodities but ensured supervision over the market prices and saw that they were under control. The followers of Alauddin gave up these measures.

The establishment of the Delhi Sultanate was marked by a considerable growth of monetization of economy as evidenced by the currency system or coins in circulation. There was no pure silver

coinage prior to the establishment of the Delhi Sultanate. Iltutmish introduced gold and silver Tanka and a copper Jital that was especially at 1/48th of a Tanka in North India and 1/50th in the Deccan after the conquest of Devagiri and a ratio of 1:10 between gold and silver was established by him.

The silver currency remained dominant till the reign of Alauddin but later silver coinage slowly disappeared. Muhammad bin Tughlak introduced a coin of copper and brass alloy and reckoned it at the value of silver Tanka. For the first time, this coin had an engraving in Persian. Introduction of token currency by Muhammad bin Tughlak ended in a thorough failure. Slavery and slave trade flourished throughout the Delhi Sultanate period.

As land and man relationship was very favourable, and agricultural land was in abundance, double cropping was prevalent around Delhi. They raised food crops like wheat, barley, paddy, millets, Jowar, and pulses and cash crops like sugarcane cotton, oil seeds and sesame linseed, etc. The Sultans encouraged digging canals to promote agriculture. Ghiyasuddin was the first to dig canals while Ferozshah also dug two canals from the river Yamuna and it was considered the largest canal network in India till the 19th century.

Cultivation was based on individual peasant farming, but the peasant economy was not at all egalitarian and the divide was immense. We notice the occurrence of intermediaries between the peasant and the state in the Khot and the Muqqaddams and they were designated Zamindars and Chowdharies under Ferozshah Tughlak, which continued under the Mughals also.

There is a view that on the eve of Ghorian conquest of India, the urban economy was in decline. The towns were fewer and smaller in extent in the centuries prior to the founding of Delhi Sultanate. D.D. Kosambi remarks that the capital was a camp on the move and the urban ruling elite was on the whole along with the army while lower levels of the community were totally ruralized. R.S. Sharma is also of the same view.

On the other hand, we have the evidence of the contemporary citings of administrative centres, Delhi, Multan, Anihilwara (Patna) Cambay, Kara Lakhnauti and Daultabad or Devagiri. Most of the 13th century towns are headquarters of Iqta like Hansi, Kara and Anihilwara. The need for new luxuries of life made the ruling elite depend on numerous artisans and craftsmen skilled in their areas of specialization, who migrated from other countries. Urban craftsmen, who provided these new goods with the help of new technological devices, came to India.

The arrival of spinning wheel or Charkha increased the production of yarn manifold. This very important mechanical device is referred to in Isami's Futuha-s-Salatin datable to AD 1350. Lynn White Jr. points out that spinning wheel was unknown in ancient India and this must have led to large-scale manufacture and production of cloth during the Sultanate.

The weaving of silk cloth, a luxury item began in the middle of the Sultanate period. Carpet weaving on the vertical loom also appeared during this period. Most notably, paper manufacturing craft was also established and the earliest surviving piece of paper datable to 13th century comes from Gujarat.

The building industry underwent a considerable technological transformation. The important new techniques were the use of cementing lime and vaulted roofing, with exclusive use of the true arch and dome. Consequently, we also came across large brick and rubble structures.

The Sultanate coinage reflects pre-eminently the growth of commerce, internal and external. The demand for cavalry horses in the Sultanate made them import these from as far as Ukraine and Russian steppes. During the period, the export exceeded imports and there was a large flow of bullion.

Irfan Habib remarks that what the Sultans thus brought about was not a social revolution in any modern sense but the creation of a new system of agrarian exploitation, with a parasitical urban growth based upon it. It united political power with economic power more fully than ever before, vesting the control over the bulk of the surplus in the hands of a ruling class whose composition

---

was determined not by inheritance but formally by the will of the sovereign, and whose individual members remained permanently unattached to any particular parcels of land, Irfan Habib also sees the traits of feudalism in the denial of rights to the peasants and oriental despotism due to the excessive centralization of power.

## REFERENCES

- Jackson, Peter. “The Delhi Sultanate: A Political and Military History”, Cambridge University Press, 2003
- Early, Abraham, “The Age of Wrath: A history of the delhi Sultanate” Penguin, UK, 2013.
- Habib, Mohammad. “Delhi Sultanate and its Times”, OUP India, 2013.
- Syed, M.H, “History of Delhi Sultanate”, Anmol Prakashan ,Delhi, 2004.
- [www.importantindia.com/551/administration-of-delhi-sultanate/](http://www.importantindia.com/551/administration-of-delhi-sultanate/)
- [www.historydiscussion.net](http://www.historydiscussion.net) ›
- <https://syskool.com> ›