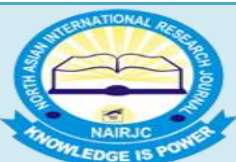
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RISE AND EXPANSION OF DELHI SULTANATE: A HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

***DR. AJEET SINGH**

Associate Professor, Head Department of History Bundelkhand Degree College, Jhansi

Introduction

The Medieval Period in Indian history is difficult to clearly define. It may be perceived as the long phase of India's transition from the ancient to the immediately pre-colonial times (which some historians regard as India's early modern age). The latter period would naturally be imagined commencing from Vasco da Gama's voyage around the Cape of Good Hope in 1498, or, alternatively, the establishment of the Mughal Empire (1526). The renewed Islamic advance into north India, roughly after the year 1000 and leading to the rise of the Delhi sultanate (1206) can be held to mark in political and cultural terms the beginning of the medieval period. What is characterized by many historians as "Indian feudalism" appears to have reached its high mark around AD 1000, by which time there came into vogue, in several of the Hindu principalities of north India, the practice of making secular hereditary grants to kinsmen of the rulers as well as to high officials and vassals. These were in addition to grants made for the maintenance of temples and priests that had continued since the early centuries of the Christian era.

The peasants under these conditions, though increasingly subjugated as a consequence of the hereditary control of grantees over land, were still far from being reduced to serfdom. They essentially remained small producers who were not entirely immune to fluctuations in the market demand for agricultural products. Urban centers, shrinking since the decline of the Gupta Empire, also started reviving, particularly in northwestern India around this time. There was also a general revival of foreign commerce, which is attested to by Arab geographers' accounts and reinforced by Marco Polo, as well as Chola epigraphs. This revival in turn gave a fillip to the export of items like hemp and sugar, stimulating small-scale production, including that by peasants cultivating cash crops. On the whole, by the beginning of 11th century, the agrarian economy in many parts of India appears to

have reached a point where a considerable social surplus was available for appropriation by local potentates controlling land, making them more resourceful and assertive.

The rise of a new warrior class represented by Rawats or Rajput cavalrymen was a development of far-reaching significance of this period. By the seventh century, charioteers of the ancient period began to give way to cavalry belonging to newly risen warrior clans as the armed servitors of Hindu rulers in north India. Such a development must have been greatly aided by the arrival of the concave saddle and the use of a primitive wooden stirrup that enabled a mounted warrior to charge with a lance or sword. Contributing significantly to political fragmentation and decentralization of political authority within existing state systems, the Rawat cavalrymen tended to add a new layer of superior right holders in the rural society in north India. They were to survive often as Khots and Muqaddams in the Delhi sultanate, described to us as chewing betel leaf and riding horses in Tarikh-i Firuz Shahi by Ziya' Barani.

The early years of the 11th century also witnessed renewed interaction between Islam and Hindu civilizations after a gap of about 275 years since the Arab conquest of Sind and southern Punjab early in the eighth century. This renewed expansion laid the pattern of subsequent Islamic penetration of the Indian subcontinent. The nature of Ghaznavi authority in the Punjab until AD 1186 was not apparently very different from that of the Delhi Sultanate during the 13th century. As was the case with the iqta' system of the Delhi sultanate, an arrangement making it possible to appropriate a large part of the agrarian surplus and use it for the maintenance of a town-based war machine had precedents in the administration of the Punjab and Sind annexed to the Ghaznavid Empire in the 11th century. An important feature of this arrangement was the incorporation of a large body of Hindu hereditary chiefs in the state structure. The Ghaznavi sultans resorted to large-scale enslavement of ordinary inhabitants captured during raids into the territories of Hindu rulers, but they also recruited Hindu soldiers and commanders as mercenaries.

This led to the emergence of a large body of troops, cavalry as well as infantrymen, within the Ghaznavi army who were Hindus commanded by their own leaders (muqaddams). These Hindu soldiers and other state personnel lived at Ghazni and Lahore in their separate quarters where they freely observed their social and religious rituals. The widow of a deceased Hindu resident of Ghazni is reported by a contemporary to have performed sati publicly. Masud's military commander, Tilak, following the custom of Hindu rulers installed a kettle drum at the gate of his mansion at Lahore. The presence of troops identified by Abu Rehan Alberuni as Kanaras (those hailing from Karnataka) suggests that not all the Indian military personnel in the Ghaznavid army were inducted through enslavement or as levies contributed by subjugated chiefs. Evidently, some of the Hindu warrior groups from distant regions of the Indian subcontinent were recruited as mercenaries.

The raids by Mahmud, however, did generate, as Alberuni testifies, strong resentment against Muslims among Indians who had to face the brunt of his savagery in northwestern India. References in some of the Gahadavala and Chahamana inscriptions to a "Turukshka danda," a tax on Muslims or for meeting expenses on defense against raids by them, support this impression. But textual and epigraphically evidence also suggests the presence of Muslim settlements in many of the territories controlled by Hindu princes during the 11th and 12th centuries, which shows that ordinary Muslims were not harmed. Similarly, despite Alberuni's assertion of Hindu hostility to Muslims, he himself refers to his free discourses with Brahmans, who in time became anxious to learn about the new discoveries of science that went beyond their own books. Alberuni himself responded to a desire in circles of the scholarly world of Islam to obtain an accurate knowledge of Indian sciences and Hindu beliefs and customs. He tried to satisfy this quest in a magisterial work, Kitab al-Hind (Alberuni's India, translated by E. C. Sachau).

On the Indian side during the same period, curiosity to understand the Greek concepts of astronomy preserved in early Islamic writings was quite manifest. This emerges not only from what Alberuni tells us about Brahman scholars reciprocating his curiosity about their scientific knowledge and beliefs but also from the appearance in Sanskrit of astrological works entitled Tajika-nilakanthi (Arab Astrology) composed round this time. The Sanskrit legend on the Ghaznavid tankas, for example, illustrates an attempt to interpret Islamic concepts for a Hindu audience: V. S. Agarwal cites, in this context, the rendering of the word "allah" as "avyakta" (invisible one). According to him in "The Sanskrit Legend on the Bilingual Tankas of Mahmud Ghazni," this "happy rendering" shows a "genuine understanding of each other's philosophical concepts" on the part of Hindu and Muslim scholars brought together under Ghaznavid tutelage. The attitude of sympathetic appreciation of Indian culture and philosophy survived on the Muslim side in the writings of Amir Khusrau as well as in the recorded conversations of some of the Chishti Sufis of the 13th and 14th centuries.

The establishment and consolidation of the Delhi Sultanate (AD 1206–1236) was no doubt linked to the military superiority that the Ghurids enjoyed over their Hindu adversaries. They had easier access to superior-quality Central Asian warhorses and were already using the iron horseshoe not yet used in India. Their greater expertise in the use of the iron stirrup possibly enabled them to resort to the use of mounted archers against the mounted lancers of their opponents to good effect. This initial military advantage was enhanced by their success in building a state structure that extracted a very large part of surplus through the working of an assignment or iqta'system. The establishment of the Delhi Sultanate led to important economic changes. The growth of a cash nexus coexisting with the iqta'system and the imposition of tax-rent (set at half the value of produce) over a very large area in the beginning of the 14th century perhaps represented the most significant of these changes. These,

in turn, led to a considerable expansion of internal trade, drawing food grains and other agricultural products to the towns and so leading simultaneously to a new spurt of urban growth.

Numismatic evidence of the period also suggests the prevalence of brisk commerce, India's favorable balance in overseas trade leading to the inflow of gold and silver in large quantities. Both the expansion of commerce and accompanying urban growth were partly facilitated by the introduction of crafts based on new technological devices and skills like papermaking, the spinning wheel, sericulture, and liquor distillation introduced from abroad. The new accurate (involving use of the arch) building technique not only accelerated building activity but also gave rise to the subsidiary crafts of brick making and manufacture of lime mortar. This new building technique transformed the architectural scene of urban settlements in most places outside Assam, Orissa, and peninsular India. Apparently, the use of force was necessary in some—indeed, many—instances. Slave labor could be employed at the new crafts. Large-scale enslavement in times of war and natural calamities gave rise to a brisk slave market at Delhi.

The Delhi sultans, like their Arab and Ghaznavi predecessors in Sind and the Punjab, came to treat the Hindus of the conquered territories as zimmis, who, according to Islamic political theory, would enjoy the status of protected people on payment of jiziya, a poll tax. At the same time, the impossible task of calculating and realizing jiziya from the vast Hindu population was circumvented by calling the land revenue realized from the predominantly Hindu rural sector khiraj-o-jiziya (tribute and poll tax). Until the mid-14th century, none of the sultans tried to impose the jiziya outside the towns. Firuz Shah Tughlaq (AD 1351–1388) did try to impose the jiziya as a poll tax on all Hindus, including the Brahmans, hitherto exempt, and this led to a strong protest by the Hindus of Delhi. In all probability, this measure petered out in Firuz Shah's own lifetime. Subsequently, the jiziya was never properly levied in the Delhi sultanate or in any one of the successor states.

The Delhi sultans, despite the religious bigotry of some of them, were generally obliged to be quite tolerant toward the public display of Hindu rites in the towns and localities controlled by the sultans, including the capital city of Delhi. Sultan Jalal al-Din Firuz Khalji (1290–1296) is quoted by Ziya' Barani in Tarikh-i Firuz Shahi as having complained that crowds of Hindu men and women daily "pass under the walls" of his palace, "beating drums and blowing their trumpets, proceeding to the Jamuna, where they worship idols and perform acts of kufr (infidelity)," without his being able to check them. Barani himself describes how in the 13th century, the Hindu Multanis and Shahs of Delhi had accumulated abundant wealth by lending to the nobles of the Delhi sultanate against drafts on their assignments. These prosperous Hindus had also built for themselves a large number of new temples in the territory controlled by the sultans. Firuz Shah Tughlaq (AD 1351–1388) sought to remove some of these temples on the basis that these were built without the formal permission of the authorities.

By the end of the 13th century, the top crust of military officers in the Delhi Sultanate, initially dominated by the Sultan's Turkish slaves and the freeborn Tajik (Persian-speaking) officers, came to include—in addition to a number of Ghurid aristocrats—men belonging to such eth- nic groups as the Khaljis, Qaraunas (Turks serving under the Mongols), and more importantly, Indian converts to Islam. These Indian converts were looked down upon by others as upstarts and intruders. By AD 1253, the Indian Muslims had come to acquire a position where one of their leading representatives, 'Imad al-Din Rehan, managed to outmanoeuvre, for a brief interlude, the slave nobles at the court of Nasir al-Din Mahmud Shah (AD 1246–1266). Under the Khalji and Tughlaq Sultans, the Indians became still more visible in the nobility. Writing around 1356, Ziya' Barani gives vent to his resentment over their rise by referring to many of them as belonging to different menial castes (baghban/gardener, khammar/distiller, mali/gardener, naddaf/cotton-dresser, etc.), being both Hindus and Muslims.

Inclusion of many Hindus in the nobility, apparently, flowed from the clout gained by Hindu guards (paiks) whose special task was to protect the person of the Sultan. Prompt intervention of the paiks had prevented an assassination attempt by one of 'Ala al-Din Khalji's nephews to capture the throne in 1301. It was again with the support of commanders of paiks belonging to the Parwari warrior clan (many of them Hindus) that Khusrau Khan ruled as a Sultan for several months, after having assassinated Qutb al-Din Mubarak Shah Khalji in AD 1320. Hindu officers belonging to the category of financiers managing land revenue became prominent under Muhammad bin Tughlaq (AD 1325–1351). Some of them, like Bhiran Rai, the mutasarrif (auditor) of Gulbarga in 1340, became the target of disaffected nobles resisting Muhammad bin Tughlaq.

The changes in the composition of the nobility were accompanied by a process of conflict and accommodation with Hindu local chiefs within the power structure of the Delhi Sultanate at different levels. The creation of a new layer of rural intermediaries identified by Ibn Battuta (AD 1333–1344) as chaudhuris, each one of whom exercised jurisdiction over a nominal group of 100 villages, may be taken to mark a stage in this process. The chaudhuris, remunerated through revenue-free land grants, continued to be a part of the fiscal administration of the countryside not only in the Delhi sultanate but in the Mughal Empire as well.

Contrary to his reputation as a sultan who treated Hindus harshly, Firuz Shah Tughlaq (AD 1351–1388) extended unprecedented concessions to hereditary chiefs who were mostly Hindus. In his proclamation on the eve of his march to Bengal (AD 1354), Firuz Shah gave an assurance to the local chiefs of the region "beyond the Kosi" (in Insha-i Mahru by 'Ain al-Din 'Abdu-llah bin Mahru) that the revenue demand for the current year would be remitted. He also promised to reduce burdensome taxes and to stick to the settlement, possibly favorable to the chiefs, made by the then-ruler of Bengal, Haji Ilyas Shams al-Din Bhankara (1341–1358). Partly corroborating this information, Barani also hints at the reconciliation of chiefs who were in rebellion for many years during Muhammad bin Tughlaq's reign (AD 1325–1351).

The new literary trends in Persian writing produced in India as well as in those of the Indian languages including Sanskrit, during the 14th and 15th centuries; often reflect an acute awareness of India as a distinct cultural and political entity in which elements identified with Islamic presence are perceived as acceptable components. The long patriotic passages in the Nuh-sipihr (Nine Heavens) of Amir Khusrau are the most striking illustration of this trend. Norms of chivalry and social cor- rectness highlighted by Vidyapati Thakkura, popularly known as Thakkur Pheru, in Purusha-Pariksha (The Test of a Man; 1412–1416) projected a ruling-class culture free of religious rancour. In one of the stories narrated by Vidyapati, the heroic exploits of two Rajput warriors in the service of Muhammad bin Tughlaq are extolled for having defeated and killed a Mongol chief referred to as Kaphara (kafir, infidel).

The same period also witnessed the spread of Sufic doctrines among Indian Muslims; the most influential of them was the teachings of the Chishti Sufis. As revealed by Nizam al-Din Auliya's conversations recorded by his disciple Hasan Sijzi, these doctrines not only leaned toward greater tolerance for unorthodox attitudes and practices but also spoke of the Chishtis' appreciation of some of the beliefs and practices of the Hindu yogis they met frequently. As Muhammad Habib opined in Politics and Society during the Early Medieval Period, "converting non- Muslims was no part of the mission of Chishti sufis"; claims suggesting that particular Muslim communities were converted by early Chishti saints, according to him, are later inventions. The impact of Chishti teachings, however, contributed significantly to molding the popular Islamic beliefs and practices in a major part of the subcontinent. The rise of devotional cults within Brahmanic Hinduism during the same period was a parallel development that contributed to blunting the clash of religious doctrines. This process was further strengthened by the emergence of the nonadulatory nirguna bhakti cults identified with Kabir, Nanak, and others during the 15th and 16th centuries.

By the end of the 14th century, the Delhi Sultanate had come to acquire a reputation for amicable relations between Hindus and Muslims, so that Sharf al-Din 'Ali Yazdi, the chronicler of Timur, was prompted to describe the Muslims opposing Timur in his expedition (AD 1398), as "Hindus," "faithless ones," "faithless Hindus," "hypocrites." Massacres of such Muslims were therefore implicitly held to be justified because of their association with Hindus. The situation during the 15th century, in most of the regions controlled by states succeeding the Delhi sultanate, was not very different. One significant development of the 14th and 15th centuries was, of course, the emergence of regional Hindu powers, such as the Sisodiyas of Mewar, the Gajapatis of Orissa, and the Vijayanagar Empire, who frequently fought with their Muslim neighbors over territorial disputes, which tended to create a false impression of an ongoing conflict between Hindu and Muslim powers for supremacy. Recurring clashes of Mewar with the sultanates of Gujarat and Malwa until the first quarter of the 16th century contributed to such an impression.

A continuous state of war between the Bahmanis and Vijayanagar, which was obviously rooted in their conflicting ambitions over the Raichur Doab, was another conflict of the period, in the course of which much religious bigotry was displayed on both sides. That the element of religious divide in interstate conflicts of the 15th century was often a superficial matter is shown by the claim of Rana Kumbha of Mewar in one of his inscriptions that he was a "Hindu sultan" (Hindu suratrana) and his putting the name Allah in Arabic characters on the top layers of his Victory Tower. The Vijayanagara emperors for long used the title "sultan over Hindu rayas" (Hindu raya suratrana) and also kept in their employ a large contingent of Muslim horsemen, who were provided all facilities to perform their religious rites. The Bahmanis on their part incorporated in their ruling apparatus Hindu chiefs. Indeed, they promoted south Indian Brahmans in their central government on such a scale that it gave rise to a tradition that the founder of the dynasty was originally a Hindu brought up and trained by a Brahman.

In other successor states of the 15th century, too, the trend of accommodating Hindu local chiefs in the state structure at different levels and their growing power and influence was as manifest as it had been in the Delhi Sultanate during the 14th century. Strong zamindar support to Sharqi rule was indicated by the widespread resistance offered by the local chiefs of the Gangetic Plain to the Lodi takeover of Jaunpur in AD 1489. Many of these chiefs in the end had to be accommodated in the Lodi service. The prominent role played by Purbia Rajput soldiers and their captains, led by Medini Rai under Mahmud Khalji (AD 1518) of Malwa, is well known. The authority wielded by some of the Hindu chiefs under Ilyas Shahis in Bengal, which led to the capture of power by one of them, Raja Ganesh (AD 1415–1418), again points to a similar situation. Rushbrook Williams has surely misread this situation when he suggests that in the beginning of 16th century, Hindu and Muslim powers in India were arrayed against each other for a final showdown. According to him, in his work, An Empire Builder of the Sixteenth Century, he writes: "The Rajput con- federacy led by Mewar was almost ready to seize the empire which lay within its grasp."

As discussed, India of the 15th century was a rather bewildering mosaic of regional powers, many of them ruled by Hindu warrior clans. Each one of these powers imagined itself a successor of the Delhi sultanate in the region it controlled and also had the tendency to accommodate within its structure cultural and religious groups other than those represented by the ruling clans. It was symptomatic of this situation that an alliance of Indian powers cutting across the religious divide confronted Babur at Kanwa under Rana Sanga's command in AD 1527. Out of the supposed total strength of 100,000 troops who fought at Kanwa against Babur, it must be remembered, the number of Muslims was put at 22,000 (12,000 Mewatis, and 10,000 Afghans).

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