

3

Establishment and Consolidation of Delhi Sultanate under the Ilbari Sultans of Delhi

Sultanate is a kingdom which is ruled by a king who assumes the title of Sultan. The title was derived from an Arabic word, which literally means power. Thus, Sultan means a person who exercises power in a territory. The Sultanate ruled by the Muslim Sultans or kings in north India had its capital at Delhi, and so it came to be called as the Sultanate of Delhi. Prior to the Muslim conquest, Delhi was a small Rajput stronghold, but later it emerged as an imperial capital. The Sultans of Delhi ruled for 320 years, from 1206-1526, during which the following five dynasties (ruling families) ruled successively:

- (1) The Ilbari dynasty (also known as the Slave or Mamluk dynasty)
- (2) Khalji dynasty,
- (3) Tughluq dynasty,
- (4) Saiyyid dynasty, and
- (5) Lodhi dynasty.

The era stretching from 1206-1526 is called the era of the Sultanate of Delhi. Some historians refer to the state under these dynasties as the Sultanates of Delhi in plural terms, though generally it is used as a singular term. The Sultanate came to an end in 1526 when Zahir al-Din Muhammad Babur laid the foundation of the Mughal dynasty after defeating Sultan Ibrahim Lodhi, the last Sultan of Delhi, in the first battle of Panipat in 1526. It is important to bear in mind that though the capital of the Mughal rulers was also Delhi, they never used the title of Sultan and styled themselves as *Padshah* (Emperor). Therefore, they are not referred to as the Sultans of Delhi.

3.1 Establishment of the Sultanate of Delhi

As pointed out earlier, in 1206, Sultan Ghiyath al-Din Mahmud, the successor of late Sultan Shihab al-Din Ghauri, manumitted the Turkish slave general Qutb al-Din Aybeg, and also bestowed the title of ‘Sultan’ on him. In addition, in the same year Aybeg made the city of Lahore as his capital. (Later, the capital was shifted to Delhi). In this way, the foundation of the Sultanate of Delhi as an independent state was laid.

3.2 Ilbari Sultans of Delhi

Sultan Qutb al-Din Aybeg (r. 1206-10) was not only the founder of the Delhi Sultanate, he also laid the foundation of the Ilbari dynasty, better remembered as Slave or *Mamluk* dynasty, which ruled from 1206 to 1290. The kings of this dynasty are also known as the Early Turkish Sultans of Delhi. The Sultans or Kings of this dynasty were ethnically Turkish, belonging to the Ilbari clan of Turks. Since three important Sultans of this dynasty (Aybeg, Iltutmish and Balban) were originally slaves, therefore, their dynasty came to be known as Slave or *Mamluk* dynasty. It is important to note that these three kings had been manumitted or set free before accession to the throne. Therefore, they cannot be regarded as the ‘Slave Kings’. Moreover, the rest of the Sultans of the dynasty were not slaves.

3.3 Sultan Qutb al-Din Aybeg (r. 1206-1210)

Sultan Qutb al-Din Aybeg originally belonged to Turkestan, and was a slave of Sultan Muhammad Ghauri. He was well-trained in the art of warfare. After victory in the second Battle of Tara'in in 1192, Aybeg was made in-charge of the Indian territories by Muhammad Ghauri. With the permission from his master, he extended the territory of the Ghaurid Empire by conquest and annexation in north India.

After Sultan Muhammad Ghauri's assassination in 1206, Sultan Qutb al-Din Aybeg ascended the throne in 1206. His authority as the independent ruler of the Indian territories was acknowledged by the provincial governors in India such as Ikhtiyar al-Din Khalji, the Governor of Bengal and Bihar, and Nasir al-Din Qabachah, the Governor of Sindh and Multan, who was also a Turkish slave of Sultan Shihab al-Din Ghauri. However, Aybeg's authority was challenged by Taj al-Din Yalduz, the ruler of Ghaznah, which also resulted in conflict between them.¹ Nevertheless, the life of Sultan Qutb al-Din Aybeg was cut short by his accidental death in 1210 in Lahore, where he was also buried.

3.4 Sultan Aram Shah (r. 1210-1211)

After the sudden death of Aybeg, the *umara* or nobles in Lahore raised Aram Shah to the throne, who could rule the Sultanate for only few months. Being politically weak and incapable, he proved ill-qualified to rule the Sultanate. The *umara* of Delhi invited Aybeg's slave and son-in-law, Shams al-Din Iltutmish, the Governor of Badaun, to Delhi to replace Aram Shah and become Sultan. Therefore, Aram Shah was defeated by the forces of Iltutmish, who finally ascended the throne of Delhi in 1211. By that time, the process of state formation by the Turkish conquest in north India was not yet completed, and the Sultanate of Delhi was still in its nascent phase. The political authority was yet to be firmly established and the state structures and administrative set up of the Sultanate were still to be put in place.

3.5 Sultan Shams al-Din Iltutmish (r. 1211-1236)

After defeating the forces of Aram Shah, Iltutmish ascended the throne of Delhi and assumed the title of Shams al-Din in 1211. Originally, Iltutmish was a slave of Sultan Qutb al-Din Aybeg, but he rose to the position of Governorship of province of Badaun owing to his administrative skills and ability. Later, he married Aybeg's daughter, and became his son-in-law. Iltutmish was manumitted or set free by Aybeg at the orders of Sultan Muhammad Ghauri.

Sultan Shams al-Din Iltutmish is considered the real founder of the Sultanate. In the opinion of historians, the empire established by Aybeg and Iltutmish matched that of the Guptas or of Harsha.² He is credited with the consolidation of the Muslim rule in South Asia. He moved the capital from Lahore to Delhi. When he ascended the throne of Delhi, the writ of the state was yet to be uniformly and firmly established. He suppressed the rebellious Qutbi nobles (the associates of the late Sultan Qutb al-Din Aybeg), who considered him a slave, and had refused to accept his rule in the beginning. There were external and internal threats to the political authority of the Sultanate, which was contested by the Mongols as well as many regional leaders, most notably in Ghaznah, Multan and Bengal. Not only did he avert an

¹ Minhaj al-Siraj Juzjani, *Tabaqat-i Nasiri*, (comp. in 1260), ed. Muhammad Abd Allah Chughtai (Lahore: Kitabkhana Naurus, 1952), 526.

² Hermann Kulke and Dietmar Rothermund, *A History of India*, 3rd ed. (London and New York: Routledge, 1999 rpt.; first pub. 1986), 158.

imminent Mongol invasion in India in 1221,³ Iletmish also suppressed the rival claimants to political power, who had refused to accept his authority, such as Nasir al-Din Qabachah in Sindh and Multan, Taj al-Din Yalduz in Ghaznah, and Ali Mardan Khalji in Bengal.⁴ Sultan Iletmish gave his personal slaves (*bandagan-i khass*) governorships in these newly conquered territories which were far from the capital. In this way, by deploying the resources of personal trust and loyalty, he consolidated his political authority in these regions.⁵ In 1229, he received envoys from the Abbasid Caliph of Baghdad, al-Mustansir Bi-Allah (r. 1226-42), who had sent a robe of honour, title of *Nasir-i Amir al-Muminin* (Helper of the Commander of the faithful) and investiture for Iletmish.⁶ These objects symbolized the recognition of the rule of the Sultan as a legitimate ruler. He issued a new silver coinage, which also signified assertion of his independent political authority.

The Sultan recovered vast territories lost under his predecessor, Aram Shah, and extended the authority of the Sultanate to regions including Ranthambhor, Mandor, Jalor, Malwah, Ujjain, Gwalior, Katehar, Bahraich, Awadh and Doab. Primarily, he followed a policy of consolidation, rather than expansion. Moreover, a great deal of attention was paid to institution-building in order to ensure the sustainability of Muslim rule in India. Sultan Iletmish consolidated the administrative structures in the Sultanate. He particularly paid attention to the administration of justice. It is said that he had fixed a chain outside the palace for redressing complaints of the masses. Since Indian economy was largely agrarian, he established agriculture department. He initiated works of public welfare as well, such as construction of a huge water storage tank in Delhi to overcome the problem of water shortage in the capital. He constructed very famous monuments such as Qutb Minar at Delhi, and mosques in Ajmer and Badaun. He established educational institutions or *madrassahs* for promoting education among the people. As a person, he was known for his piety and fear of God. He was a patron of poets, religious scholars or *ulama*, and Sufis. Suhrawardi Sufi Shaykh Baha al-Din Zakariyya of Multan, Chishti Sufi Shaykh Qutb al-Din Bakhtiyar Kaki as well as Shaykh Jalal al-Din Tabrezi and Shaykh Nur al-Din Mubarak Ghaznavi were among his personal friends.

During his reign, the Shamsi *umara* (the nobles associated with Sultan Shams al-Din Iletmish), also known as *umara-i chehalgani* or the 'Forty Nobles' played an important role in army and civil administration. They were predominantly Turk in ethnic terms, and later on, assumed the role of king-makers after the demise of Iletmish in 1236.

3.6 Successors of Iletmish

Iletmish had eleven sons, who were either minor or incapable at the time of his death. So before this death, he had nominated her daughter Raziyya as his successor, but after his death the Turkish nobles put aside the will of the deceased Sultan, and raised his son Firuz to the throne of Delhi.

³ Agha Hussain Hamadani, *The Frontier Policy of the Delhi Sultans* (Islamabad: National Institute of Historical and Cultural Research, 1986), 47-48.

⁴ A. B. M. Habibullah, *The Foundation of Muslim Rule in India (A History of the Establishment and Progress of the Turkish Sultanate of Delhi: 1206-1290 A.D.)*, 2d rev. ed., (Allahabad: Central Book Depot, 1961), 92-100.

⁵ Sunil Kumar, "When Slaves were Nobles: The Shamsi *Bandagan* in the Early Delhi Sultanate", *Studies in History*, Vol. 10. No. 1, New Delhi (1994), 45-46.

⁶ K. A. Nizami, *Royalty in Medieval India* (Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, 1997), 22.

Sultan Rukn al-Din Firuz (r. 1236): Firuz ascended the throne and adopted the title of Rukn al-Din. In the beginning of his rule, he showed dignity, but later gave himself to excessive pleasure and enjoyments. Consequently, the state affairs were neglected. In these circumstances, Firuz's mother, Shah Turkan, became the real master or the *de facto* ruler of the Sultanate, who started administering and regulating the government in a very arbitrary manner. When she conspired to kill Raziyyah, the populace of Delhi attacked the palace and seized Shah Turkan. Soon Rukn al-Din Firuz was dethroned and replaced by his able sister.

Sultana Raziyyah (r. 1236-40): Raziyyah was a capable daughter of late Sultan Iltutmish. Her ascendancy to the throne of Delhi in 1236 is indicative of the role of public opinion in the politics of Delhi Sultanate. She was made the queen at the will of the populace of Delhi.⁷ She was the only queen to sit on the throne of Delhi, and among the few women rulers of India. In fact, the Turkish women enjoyed greater freedom as compared to those living in other parts of the Muslim lands. There were precedents of women rulers in that era: In 1250, Shajarat al-Durr, the wife of late Sultan al-Salih Ayyub, was proclaimed Sultan of Egypt after the death of the Sultan's son and successor. In the twelfth century, princesses ruled over the Qara-Khitans in Turkistan, while Terken Khatun, the mother of Khwarizmshah Muhammad ruled Khwarizm before the Mongol invasion in 1221.⁸ After Sultana Raziyyah's accession, she consolidated her position by restoring law and order in the country, and overpowered those who defied her authority. Some of the rulers voluntarily offered their submission. Moreover, she tried to counter the growing power of the Turkish nobles by appointing an Abyssinian named Yaqut to a high post. This naturally offended the nobles, who conspired against her. The governor of Bhatinda (near present day Qasur), Malik Ikhtiyar al-Din rebelled against the Sultana. In the battle, Raziyyah was defeated and imprisoned. The nobles raised another son of Iltutmish, Bahram Shah, to the throne. Raziyyah was later put to death in 1240 after being defeated by Bahram's troops.

Sultan Bahram Shah (r. 1240-42): Bahram Shah was as worthless and incapable to rule as his brother Rukn al-Din Firuz. During his reign, the Mongols invaded Punjab, attacked Lahore and massacred its inhabitants. The nobles later put the Sultan to death. His reign was marked by the ascendancy of the Turkish nobility or the *umara-i chehalgani*.⁹

Sultan 'Ala al-Din Masud (r. 1242-46): After killing Bahram Shah, the Turkish nobles put Sultan Masud, a grandson of Iltutmish, on the throne of Delhi, but he proved equally worthless. He remained a puppet in the hands of the Turkish nobility, who had assumed the role of king-makers, and concentrated all powers in their hand. At last, he was also dethroned like his predecessors, and replaced by a son of Iltutmish named Nasir al-Din Mahmud, who was an infant when Sultan Iltutmish had died.

⁷ Jamila Brijbhushan, *Sultan Raziya: Her Life and Times: A Reappraisal* (New Delhi: Manohar, 1990), 14-15.

⁸ Peter Jackson, "Sultan Raziyya Bint Iltutmish" in *Women in the Medieval Islamic World: Power, Patronage and Piety*, ed. Gavin R. G. Hambly (Hampshire and London: Macmillan, 1998), 181, 189-90.

⁹ Gavin Hambly, "Who were the *Chihalgani*, The Forty Slaves of Sultan Shams al-Din Iltutmish of Delhi?", *Iran, Journal of the British Institute of Persian Studies*, London, Vol. X (1972), 57-62, and Khurram Qadir, "Amiran-i Chihalgan of Northern India", *Journal of Central Asia*, Centre for the Study of the Civilizations of Central Asia, Quaid-i-Azam University, Islamabad, Vol. IV, No. 2 (December 1981), 59-146.

The phenomenon of dethronement or deposition of rulers in the history of Sultanate era indicates that the weak, incapable and worthless kings were not allowed to rule for long. They were sooner or later dethroned. Moreover, most of the weak rulers who managed to rule for few years had become puppets in the hands of the nobility, at whose will the kings were made and removed.

3.7 Sultan Nasir al-Din Mahmud (r. 1246-66)

Sultan Nasir al-Din Mahmud ruled the Sultanate of Delhi for twenty years. During these years, his prime minister named Balban, who was a good general and a capable administrator, played a very important role in running the affairs of the Sultanate. Besides, Balban was also the father-in-law of the Sultan. Sultan Nasir al-Din's rule was marked by peace, order and tranquility. He followed an aggressive policy against the Mongols. He also cordially received the envoys of Mongol leader, Hulagu Khan in his court. The Sultan maintained a balance of power between the two contending groups of nobility very wisely. The Sultan was famous for his piety and simple living. The statement of a fourteenth-century historian, Zia al-Din Barani, that he was reduced to the position of a puppet by Balban, his prime minister and father-in-law, is an exaggeration. After his death, he was succeeded by Balban.

3.8 Sultan Ghiyath al-Din Balban (r. 1266-86)

Balban was initially a slave of Iltutmish, who later became part of the Turkish nobility by his ability. He had served for years as the prime minister under the previous Sultan, which made him an experienced administrator of the affairs of the state. Sultan Balban ascended the throne of Delhi when he was more than sixty years of age. After assumption of royal power, he gave up drinking and gambling, and set the personal example. He also observed that under the weak successors of Sultan Iltutmish, the central authority of the government had grown weak, and as a result lawlessness was growing and rebellions were breaking out in the Sultanate. After diagnosing the problem of the state, he took a number of measures to restore law and order, and prestige of the government by creating fear of the royal authority in the hearts of the masses. Sultan Balban's idea of kingship and his political philosophy were different from other Sultans of Delhi.

Sultan Balban reorganized army and ruthlessly crushed all rebellions of governors and powerful chiefs. He also suppressed the tribes and communities spreading lawlessness in the Sultanate by plundering and looting people on the highways. He introduced strict accountability, and established intelligence department. Though he himself had been part of the Turkish nobility, he sought to curtail the powers of this ruling clique by various overt and covert strategies, such as by giving poison secretly or by harsh punishments on mere suspicion of treason and conspiracy. However, most of these political opponents punished by the Sultan were also offenders. Moreover, he gave high posts to Afghan nobles in order to counter the power of the Turkish nobility. He also effectively checked the Mongols invasions, defeated them several times and saved the Sultanate from their brutal invasions. (For details, see discussion in Unit 6, section 6.4 on the Defense Policy of the Sultans of Delhi against the Mongols). However, owing to his defence policy against the Mongols, he could not pay attention to expansion of his Empire.

Sultan Balban is said to have introduced Persian court etiquettes at the official level as observed by the Sasanian Emperors in ancient Persia such as *pai-bos* or toe-kissing.¹⁰ He also attached much importance to outward pomp and show, and the decorum of the court and riding procession.¹¹ The Persian New Year festival of *Nauruz* was officially celebrated. In introducing the ancient Persian political traditions in the Sultanate, Balban's aim was political, i.e. to consolidate his political authority by enhancing the external dignity and prestige of the institution of kingship by pomp and show, and by striking awe in the hearts of the people. For the same purpose, he also adopted the high-sounding title of *zil Allah fi al-arz* (the shadow of God on earth), which was adopted by the second Abbasid Caliph of Baghdad, Abu Jafar al-Mansur, for the first time in Muslim history.

The Sultan also administered justice for the masses, though racial discrimination existed to some extent during his rule. Royal patronage was extended to scholars, poets and Sufis. Important contemporaries of Balban include the famous Chishti Sufi, Baba Farid al-Din Masud *Ganj-i Shakar*.

3.9 Successors of Balban and the Khalji Revolution

It has been argued that the stability of Balban's Empire depended upon his personal strength, and so after his demise, the Sultanate was destabilized for some time. In fact, the real cause of the destabilization was the weak successors of Balban. His successor Kaiqubad (Balban's grandson) proved incapable. Kaiqubad's successor was a three year old infant named Kaimurth (Balban's great grandson, and son of Kaiquabad), who was removed from the throne by a noble Malik Jalal al-Din Firuz Khalji. Malik Jalal al-Din was a capable military general in Balban's army, who successfully headed the Khalji Revolution in 1290, which put an end to the rule of the Ilbari clan of Turks, and initiated the rule of the Khaljis in the Sultanate of Delhi.

¹⁰ Zia al-Din Barani, *Tarikh-i Firuzshahi* (comp. in 1359), ed. Saiyyid Ahmad Khan (Calcutta: Bibliotheca Indica, The Asiatic Society of Bengal, 1862), 41.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 25, 30-31.