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### State and State Conduct in the Sultanate of Delhi

#### 6.1 Political Philosophy of the Sultans of Delhi

The institution of Sultanate was a product of political expediency. Born out of sheer political pragmatism, the institution was legitimized by bringing it within the framework of Sunni political doctrines. The Sunni jurists had argued that the forceful imposition of rule by a military chief over a part of the Muslim world was to be accepted as legitimate provided the Caliph invested him with authority in return for his undertaking to rule according to the *shariah* and defend Muslim territory.<sup>1</sup> The rulers of independent kingdoms in the Muslim world, though completely independent for all practical purposes, needed to legitimize their rule, and for this reason, they sought confirmation of their authority from the reigning Caliphs.

The Sultans of Delhi owed allegiance to the Abbasid Caliphs of Baghdad. This allegiance was more of a symbolic nature. For this reason, the *khutba* (sermon) of Friday prayers was read in the names of the Caliphs, and coins were also struck in their names. In return, the Delhi Sultans used to receive titles and robes of honour (*khillat*) from the Caliphs, which were a symbol of the recognition of the rule of the Sultans by the Caliphs. However, practically the Caliph could not interfere in the affairs of the Sultanate. The Sultans of Delhi had a free hand in running the affairs of their kingdom. Almost all Sultans owed symbolic allegiance to the Caliphs. Only one king Sultan Qutb al-Din Mubarak Shah of Khalji dynasty claimed to be a Caliph. Similarly, Sultan Muhammad ibn Tughluq gave up all reference to Caliph in the *khutba* and coins, which made him unpopular in the kingdom. Therefore, he had to request the Caliph of Egypt to confirm him as Sultan. It shows that the Caliph was a source of legitimacy for any government in Delhi.

**Functions of the Sultans:** The Sultans were the chief locus of political authority in the Sultanate of Delhi. The Muslim political theorists have defined the following functions and duties of a Sultan:

- (i) To protect faith
- (ii) To wage *jihad* or holy war against the enemies of Islam
- (iii) To defend the territories of Sultanate against foreign aggression
- (iv) To maintain law and order, and
- (v) To collect taxes (to spend money on security and welfare, etc.)

**Checks and Balances on the Powers of the Sultans:** Generally, the Sultans of Delhi are considered to be despotic rulers, whose conduct of the state was arbitrary, and who exercised absolute powers. However, this view is erroneous and misleading, since there were many restraints to arbitrariness and despotism.

- (i) All Sultans had profound respect for *shariah* (the legal aspects of Islam), and it was impossible for them to disregard *shariah* openly. For this reason, the pleasure-seeking Sultans who openly violated the injunctions of *shariah* were soon dethroned.

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Hardy, "Part IV: Islam in Medieval India", in *Sources of Indian Tradition*, ed. Ainslie T. Embree. Vol. 1, 2d rev. ed. (New Delhi: Viking, 1991), 409.

- (ii) The powers of the Sultans were checked by the nobility and religious scholars or *ulama*, but the Sultan could overrule them.
- (iii) Generally, the Sultans were selected by the nobility and influential *ulama* on the basis of merit. Those proved to be incompetent were removed, and only the competent Sultans were allowed to rule for long.
- (iv) Public opinion also mattered to some extent, since any Sultan could not face widespread resentment from the masses for a long period of time.

**Sources of the Sultanate's Political Philosophy:** The Sultanate's political philosophy was a blend of various political traditions, e.g. Turkish (Central Asian), Persian, Islamic and local Indian traditions. However, largely within the framework of *shariah*, it was primarily influenced by the Turkish and Persian traditions. As for the ancient Indian or Hindu political traditions, there seems to be a minimal influence over the political traditions of the Sultanate of Delhi.<sup>2</sup> From Turks, the Sultans borrowed the concept of tribal principle of fitness to rule. Among Central Asian tribes, the individual chosen for tribal leadership was the one who was fit to rule owing to his leadership qualities. That is why, in the Sultanate of Delhi, the incapable Sultans could not rule longer, and were sooner or later deposed by the nobles. From Persians, the Sultans of Delhi borrowed two things: (i) the principle of hereditary succession, whereby the sons (and generally the eldest son) used to succeed the kings, and (ii) the concept of 'divine kingship'. Its source was the pre-Islamic Sassanian political theory, which assumed that a king was a divine appointee. Therefore, Sultan Balban adopted the grandiose title of *zill-Allah fi al-arz*, i.e. 'the shadow of God on earth,' and also adopted the practice of toe-kissing (*paibos*), which was prevalent among the Sassanian rulers of Persia before its conquest by the Muslim armies. The use of religion and religious symbols was meant to command unquestioning obedience from the subjects, so that nobody could disobey them or challenge their authority.

## 6.2 Administration of the Sultanate of Delhi

The administration of the Sultanate of Delhi was, to a large extent, based on the administrative model of the pre-Islamic Sassanian Empire of Persia. The administrative structure of the Delhi Sultanate can be divided into three layers: (i) central, (ii) provincial, and (iii) local, which are discussed hereunder:

### **Central Administration**

In the Sultanate of Delhi, the Sultan was the head of the state and fountain-head of all the administrative structure. He was assisted by a *Wazir* or the prime minister, who was the in-charge of *Diwan-i Wizarat*. He was the head of the administration, and exercised control over the bureaucracy. Next to him was *Mushrif-i Mumalik* (the accountant general) and *Mustaufi-i Mumalik* (the auditor general).<sup>3</sup>

The following were the main departments at the centre:

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<sup>2</sup> Peter Hardy, "Growth of Authority over a Conquered Political Elite: Early Delhi Sultanate as a Possible Case Study," in *Kingship and Authority in South Asia*, ed. J. F. Richards (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998), 224-31.

<sup>3</sup> I. H. Qureshi, *The Administration of the Sultanate of Delhi*. 2d rev. ed. (Lahore: Sh. Muhammad Ashraf, 1944 rpt., first published 1942), 84.

- (i) *Diwan-i Risalat* (Department for Religious Affairs) was placed under *Sadr al-Sudur*, who was also responsible for dispensing justice.
- (ii) *Diwan-i Qaza* (Department for Justice) under *Qazi al-Quzzat* (the Chief Justice) was responsible for administering justice.
- (iii) *Diwan-i Mazalim* (Department for Grievance Redress) under *Amir-i Dad* heard complaints against the state officials.
- (iv) *Diwan-i Arz* (Military Department) was under *Ariz-i Mumalik*, who enlisted recruits for the army and fixed their salaries. The department controlled the infantry (foot-soldiers), cavalry (army horsemen), elephant corps, firearms and weapons. Construction of forts at strategic locations was also supervised by the department.
- (v) *Diwan-i Insha* (Department for Royal Correspondence) was under *Dabir-i Khas*. He was responsible for drafting and dispatch of the orders issued by the Sultan.
- (vi) *Diwan-i Barid* (Information & Espionage/Intelligence Department) was under *Barid-i Mumalik*, who was responsible for informing the Sultan about all the happenings in the Sultanate.
- (vii) *Diwan-i Khairat* (Charity Department) was meant for poor relief.
- (viii) *Diwan-i Amir-i kahi* (Department for Agriculture) under *Amir-i kahi* was responsible for digging of canals and improving irrigation and agriculture.

In addition, the following officials of the state played a very important role in administration at the centre:

- (i) *Wakil-i Dar* was the chief dignitary of the royal household, who supervised the payment of allowances and salaries to the personal staff of the Sultan. The royal kitchen and stable were also under his supervision.
- (ii) *Amir-i Hajib* was the chief chamberlain and the master of ceremonies at the court. Nobles and the subjects were introduced to the Sultan by him.
- (iii) *Kotwal* was the head of the Police Department, who also acted as a committing magistrate. His force, which was civil in character, used to patrol at night.
- (iv) *Muhtasib* inspected the public morals and market practices.
- (v) *Amir-i Shikar* was responsible for the royal hunt.
- (vi) *Amir-i Majlis* was responsible for organizing private parties for the Sultan.
- (vii) *Naqibs* or ushers proclaimed royal orders to the army and to the general public.
- (viii) *Jandars* or the body-guards of the Sultan were responsible for the personal safety and security of the Sultan.

In addition to them, there were several minor officers as well.

### ***Provincial and Local Administration***

The Sultanate of Delhi was divided into provinces. Under Sultan Muhammad ibn Tughluq, there were 23 provinces in the Sultanate. The provincial governors were entrusted the same duties or functions which the Sultan performed at the centre. Some of the governors were called *Muqtis* while some were called *Walis*. The *Walis* were more powerful than the *Muqtis*.<sup>4</sup> Provinces were sub-divided into *shiqqs* or *sarkars* (districts), which were placed under the charge of *Shiqdars* (district officers). Next unit of administration was *parganah* (towns), where *Chaudhari* was the *parganah* officer. At local level, in villages there were *panchayats* which controlled the local administration.

### ***Fiscal Administration of the Sultanate***

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 197.

*Diwan-i Riyasat* was placed under *Rais*, who was responsible for regulating the market affairs and economy. In the provinces, *Sahib al-Diwan* was responsible for collection of revenue. The sources of revenue in the Sultanate of Delhi were the following:

- (i) *Zakat* (religious tax on the Muslims, which is 2.5% of their annual savings)
- (ii) *Jizya* (poll-tax levied on non-Muslims)
- (iii) Import duties on merchandise
- (iv) *Ghanimah* (spoils of war or booty)
- (v) *Ushr* (agricultural tax levied at the rate of 10% of the annual produce)
- (vi) *Kharaj* (tribute from the tributary states conquered by the Sultan)

### ***Recruitment Policies***

The nobility or the ruling elite in the thirteenth century was, in fact, a coalition of the Turks and the Taziks or Tajiks.<sup>5</sup> The former generally occupied all the senior military positions, while the latter filled civil appointments.<sup>6</sup> The Sultans of early Turkish Empire displayed more selectiveness in appointments and promotions as compared to the successive dynasties. These Sultans belonged to the Ilbari tribe of Turkistan, and favoured and promoted people of their own tribe, though they did not exclude other Central Asian tribes from a share in power. However, the Indian Muslims were generally excluded from high official positions, barring very few exceptions. The Khalji government was relatively more tolerant and inclusive as compared to the early Turkish Sultans, as the Khaljis did not attach much importance to lineage while making appointments. Nevertheless, in this respect, the Tughluq era was marked by appointment of Indians on high state positions. Sultan Muhammad ibn Tughluq is said to have even promoted those who belonged to the lower strata of the Hindu society.<sup>7</sup> The *wazir* of Sultan Firuz Tughluq was an Indian convert named Malik Maqbul.

### **6.3 Governance Patterns in the Sultanate of Delhi**

There were different governance patterns in the Sultanate of Delhi as there was no uniformity in administrative penetration and political control over its various regions. Various regions in the Sultanate enjoyed different political status. At the centre, there was direct political control of the state, but it got diffused as one moved away from the centre towards the peripheral regions or border areas.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, in provincial capitals, garrison towns and important cities, there was relatively strong political control as compared to the rural areas, which were almost semi-independent. In fact, in premodern times, the local communities often exercised independence from any centre of control. There existed internally well-organized, self-administering and more or less independent sub-communities in those days.<sup>9</sup> In fact, the problem of administrative penetration was directly linked to the territorial stretch of the Empire; greater the territorial extent, lesser the degree of political control and administrative penetration.

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<sup>5</sup> Irfan Habib, "Formation of the Sultanate Ruling Class of the Thirteenth Century", in *Medieval India 1: Researches in the History of India (1200-1750)*, ed. Irfan Habib (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1992), 14-15.

<sup>6</sup> Zafar Imam, *The Musalmans of the Subcontinent* (Lahore: Vanguard, 1980), 7.

<sup>7</sup> Iqtidar Husain Siddiqui, "Social Mobility in the Delhi Sultanate", 27-28.

<sup>8</sup> Tanvir Anjum, "Nature and Dynamics of Political Authority in the Sultanate of Delhi," *Historicus, Journal of the Pakistan Historical Society*, Karachi, Vol. LIV, No. 3, July-Sept 2006, 49.

<sup>9</sup> Ernest Gellner, *Conditions of Liberty: Civil Society and its Rivals* (London: Penguin, 1996), 6.

The graded levels of political authority in the Sultanate, based on the different political statuses of various regions and territories, were as follows:

(i) **Iqta** was not only transferable revenue assignment but also a unit of administration. It was under the direct control of the Sultan or the centre. The *iqtas* were governed by the *Muqtas*, who were appointed by the Sultan.

(ii) **Wilayats** were province-like units of administration directly controlled by the centre. The *walis* (like provincial governors, appointed by the Sultan) controlled their respective *wilayats*.

(iii) **Tributary States** existed in Delhi Sultanate, such as in Deccan under Sultan ‘Ala al-Din Khalji, which were indirectly ruled by him. These states were ruled by independent Hindu rulers or rajas of their own, and these areas enjoyed almost complete autonomy but they used to pay annual tribute or *khiraj* to the centre.

(iv) **Aqlim** enjoyed a unique politico-administrative status in the Sultanate of Delhi. Bengal (Lakhnauti) was the only region referred to as an *aqlim*. It was ruled by semi-independent Muslim kings, who occasionally used to send *khiraj* (tribute) to the centre. According to Barani, Sultan Balban had appointed his son Bughra Khan as the *wali* of the *aqlim* of Lakhnauti.<sup>10</sup> Later, the region became semi-independent, and consequently, it came to be ruled by the descendants of Bughra Khan.

#### 6.4 Defense Policy of the Delhi Sultans against the Mongols

The Mongols rose from Tartary (present Mongolia that lies between Russia and China), and for this reason, they were also called the Tartars. They plundered Central and Western Asia, Iraq, Persia and Afghanistan, where there were many independent Muslim states. The Mongols were known for their brutal savagery and inhuman treatment of the people.<sup>11</sup> They came to India for the first time in 1221 under their leader Chengiz Khan (b. 1155-d. 1227), also known as Temujin or Genghis Khan, during the reign of Sultan Iltutmish. Chengiz was chasing the ruler or the Shah of Khwarizm, who sought asylum in the Sultanate. Sultan Iltutmish diplomatically refused to grant him asylum saying that the climate of India would not suit the Shah of Khwarizm.<sup>12</sup> In this way, he saved India from Mongol invasion. The Mongols attacked India during the reign of Sultan Nasir al-Din Mahmud, but his able prime minister, Balban, who later became the Sultan of Delhi, forced them to go back. Later, Sultan Balban and Sultan ‘Ala al-Din Khalji devised very efficient defense policies to check the Mongol invasions.

**Sultan Balban’s Mongol Policy:** Mongol leader Hulagu Khan (r. 1217-1265), the grandson of Chengiz Khan, was the contemporary of Balban. During Balban’s reign, the Mongol successors of Hulagu repeatedly invaded India, but owing to his efficient Mongol policy, their invasions were effectively checked for the time being. The Mongols could not cross River Beas in the Punjab. Many times, the Mongols retreated without fighting when they

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<sup>10</sup> Barani, *Tarikh-i Firuzshahi*, 92.

<sup>11</sup> For a detailed study of the Mongol Empire, their leaders and military campaigns, dynasties, customs and characteristics, see Bertold Spuler, *History of the Mongols based on Eastern and Western Accounts of the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries*, Eng. trans. from the German Helga and Stuart Drummond, A volume in The Islamic World Series, ed. G. E. von Grunebaum (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1972).

<sup>12</sup> Hamadani, *The Frontier Policy of the Delhi Sultans*, 47-48.

came to know that the Sultan was approaching with his armies to fight against them. The main features of Balban's policy were the following:

- He gave up expeditions in distant lands, and remained in the capital.
- Army was reorganized. Unfit soldiers were dismissed, new capable soldiers were recruited, and good weapons were provided to them. The size of the army was also enlarged.
- Old forts were repaired, and new forts were constructed in the frontier region.
- A separate frontier province was created, which included Samana, Multan and Dipalpur, and was placed under a capable governor, who was his own son, Prince Muhammad (d. 1284), later called *Khan-i Shahid*.
- The mobilization of the Sultanate's army was increased through hunting expeditions, which was also praised by the Mongol leader Hulagu Khan.<sup>13</sup>
- Three lines of defense were formed: (i) Uch and Multan, (ii) Pakpattan and Dipalpur, and (iii) Samana, Sunam and Hansi.

**Sultan 'Ala al-Din Khalji's Mongol Policy:** Sultan 'Ala al-Din effectively checked the Mongol invasions. He not only continued the policy adopted by Balban to counter the Mongols, but also added the following new measures to the policy:

- Army of the Sultanate was reorganized and overhauled.
- He established a standing army at the centre for the first time in the history of the Sultanate era.<sup>14</sup>
- The army was enlarged by recruiting new soldiers.
- The pays of soldiers were also increased.
- The practices of *dagh* (branding of horses) and *huliah* (maintenance of descriptive rolls of soldiers) were adopted to check corruption in the institution of army.

As a result of Sultan 'Ala al-Din's measures, the Mongols did not dare to attack India during the latter part of his reign. After him, Sultan Ghiyath al-Din Tughluq effectively checked them. Sultan Muhammad ibn Tughluq also successfully dealt with the Mongol problem, but during his reign the threat of their invasion had been greatly reduced. In short, the Sultans of Delhi remained successful in countering the Mongols, whereas the Abbasid Caliphate and many Muslim kingdoms in West and Central Asia, Iraq, Persia and Afghanistan had failed to counter them.

The Mongol invasions had a lot of impact on the people and the policies of the Sultans of Delhi. Since the Mongols used to massacre the conquered people ruthlessly, their invasions created insecurity among the Indians. Some of the Delhi Sultans (e.g. Balban) could not concentrate on southward expansion of the Sultanate due to Mongol threat in the north, though Sultan 'Ala al-Din Khalji paid attention to expansion of the Sultanate in the south in Deccan in addition to countering the Mongols. Some of the internal policies of Delhi Sultans were affected by the Mongol problems, e.g. Sultan 'Ala al-Din's price control system was introduced partly because the Sultan wanted to pay his huge army which he employed against the Mongols. During the reign of Sultan Jalal al-Din Khalji, a descendant of Chengiz Khan, along with thousands of his followers accepted Islam. They came to be known as the 'New Muslims.' They settled in Mughalpura—a separate residential area near Delhi. Some of

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<sup>13</sup> Qureshi, *The Administration of the Sultanate of Delhi*, 71.

<sup>14</sup> Niazi, *The Life and Works of Sultan Alauddin Khalji*, 49.

them were offered high positions in the Sultanate as well, and also became members of the nobility. Later, a group of them was massacred by Sultan 'Ala al-Din Khalji when they tried to create problems in the Sultanate and also tried to kill the Sultan.