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Government, and Economic and Social Life under the Delhi Sultanat

The state set up by the Turks towards the end of the twelfth century in northern India gradually developed into a powerful and highly centralized state which, for some time, controlled almost the entire country extending as far south as Madurai. The Delhi Sultanat disintegrated towards the beginning of the fifteenth century, and a series of independent states were set up in different parts of the country. However, the administrative system of the Sultanat had a powerful effect on many of them, and also influenced the Mughal system of administration which developed in the sixteenth century.

THE SULTAN

Although many of the Turkish sultans in India declared themselves 'lieutenant of the faithful', i.e., of the Abbasid caliph at Baghdad, and included his name in the *khutba* in the Friday prayers, it did not mean that the caliph became the legal ruler. The caliph had only a moral position. By proclaiming his supreme position, the sultans at Delhi were only proclaiming that they were a part of the Islamic world.

The sultan's office was the most important in the Sultanat and supreme political, military, and even legal authority, was vested in him. He was responsible for the safety and security of the state. As such, he was responsible for administration and was also the commander-in-chief of the military forces. He was also responsible for the maintenance of law and justice. To discharge this function, he appointed judges but the sultan acted as a court of appeal from the judges. A direct appeal could be made to him against the high-handedness of any of his officials. The dispensation of justice was regarded as a very important function of any ruler. We have referred

to the stern manner in which Balban dispensed justice, not sparing even his relations or high officers of state. Muhammad Tughlaq applied this even to the religious classes (*ulama*) who had previously been exempted from harsh punishments.

No clear law of succession developed among Muslim rulers. The Islamic theory adhered to the idea of the election of the ruler, but accepted in practice the succession of any son of a successful ruler. However, all the sons of a ruler were considered to have an equal claim to the throne. The idea of primogeniture was fully acceptable neither to the Muslims nor to the Hindus. Some rulers did try to nominate one of the sons, not necessarily the eldest, as the successor. Iltutmish even nominated a daughter in preference to his sons. But it was for the nobles to accept such a nomination. While the Muslim opinion generally adhered to the idea of legitimacy, there was no safeguard against the usurpation of the throne by a successful military leader, as happened more than once in the Delhi Sultanat. Thus, military strength was the main factor in succession to the throne. However, public opinion could not be ignored. For fear of public opinion, the Khaljis could not dare to enter Delhi for a long time after deposing the successors of Balban, but built a new town called Siri.

Central Administration

The sultan was assisted by a number of ministers who were chosen by him and remained in office at his pleasure. The number, powers and functions of the ministers varied from time to time. A definite system of administration developed towards the end of the thirteenth century. The key figure in administration was the *wazir*. In the earlier period, the *wazir* were primarily military leaders. In the fourteenth century, the *wazir* began to be considered more an expert in revenue affairs, and presided over a large department dealing both with income and expenditure. Muhammad Tughlaq paid close attention to the organisation of the revenue department. His *wazir*, Khwaja Jahan, was widely respected, and was left in charge of the capital when Muhammad Tughlaq went out to deal with rebellions. A separate Auditor General for scrutinizing expenditure, and an Accountant

General for inspecting income worked under the *wazir*. Although quarrels between different officers hampered the smooth functioning of the department, the revenue department under Muhammad Tughlaq was able to cope with the affairs of the largest empire that had come into existence in India since the break up of the Mauryan empire. Khan-i-Jahan, a converted Tailang Brahman who was deputy to the previous *wazir*, was chosen by Firuz Tughlaq as his *wazir*. He enjoyed full authority in the revenue department. His long spell of 18 years as *wazir* is generally considered to be the high watermark of the *wazir's* influence. Khan-i-Jahan was succeeded as *wazir* by his son, Khan-i-Jahan II. The attempt of Khan-i-Jahan II to play the king-maker after the death of Firuz and the failure of the attempt resulted in a setback to the *wazir's* position. The importance of the *wazir* could revive only under the Mughals.

The most important department of state, next to the *wazir's* was the *diwan-i-arz* or the military department. The head of this department was called the *ariz-i-mamalik*. The *ariz* was not the commander-in-chief of the army, since the sultan himself commanded all the armed forces. In those days, no king could have survived on the throne if he entrusted the chief command of the armed forces to someone else. The special responsibility of the *ariz's* department was to recruit, equip and pay the army. The office of the *ariz* was an important one under the Seljukids, but we hear of it in India for the first time under Balban as a separate department. He, and later Alauddin Khalji, paid close attention to its working. Alauddin insisted upon a regular muster of the armed forces. He also introduced the branding system (*dagh*) of the horses so that the soldiers may not bring horses of poor quality to the muster. A descriptive roll of each soldier was also maintained. The army was posted in different parts of the country, a strong contingent remaining with the ruler in the capital. Balban kept his army in good trim by making it march over long distances on the pretext of undertaking hunting excursions. Of all the Delhi rulers, Alauddin Khalji had the largest standing army. The strength of his army is placed at 3,00,000 by Barani which appears to be an exaggeration. Alauddin was also the first sultan who paid his soldiers fully in cash. Earlier, the Turkish soldiers had been assigned a number of villages in the doab for the payment of their salaries. These soldiers had begun to look upon these assignments

as hereditary, and were not prepared to give up their posts though many of them had become too old and feeble to serve. Balban tried to resume these holdings, but modified his order due to the agitation created by these soldiers and the pleading of his old friend, the Kotwal of Delhi. But Alauddin abolished these holdings by a stroke of the pen. He paid 238 *tankas* to a trooper and 78 *tankas* more to one who maintained two horses. The efficiency of Alauddin's army was the main factor in his ability to contain the Mongol invasions while at the same time conquering the Deccan.

The Turks also maintained a large number of elephants which were trained for war purposes. A corps of sappers and miners was attached to the army for clearing the roads and removing the obstacles for the march of the army. The Turks and Afghans predominated in the cavalry which was considered prestigious. The Hindus were employed both in the cavalry and the infantry at the time of the Ghaznavids. They continued to be employed but largely in the infantry in the subsequent period.

There were two other important departments of state: the *diwan-i-risalat* and the *diwan-i-insha*. The former dealt with religious matters, pious foundations and stipends to deserving scholars and men of piety. It was presided over by the chief *sadr*, who was generally a leading *qazi*. He was generally also the chief *qazi*. The chief *qazi* was the head of the department of justice. *Qazis* were appointed in various parts of the empire, particularly in those places where there was a sizeable Muslim population. The *qazis* dispensed civil law based on the Muslim law (*sharia*). The Hindus were governed by their own personal laws which were dispensed by *panchayats* in the villages, and by the leaders of the various castes in the cities. Criminal law was based on regulations framed for the purpose by the rulers.

The *diwan-i-insha* dealt with state correspondence. All the correspondence, formal or confidential, between the ruler and the sovereigns of other states, and with his subordinate officials was dealt with by this department.

There were a number of other departments in addition to these. The rulers posted intelligence agents called *barids* in different parts of the empire to keep them informed of what was going on. Only a nobleman who enjoyed the fullest confidence of the ruler was

appointed the chief *barid*. The ruler's household was another important department of state. It looked after the personal comforts of the sultan and the requirements of the large numbers of women in the royal household. It also looked after a large number of *karkhanas* or departments in which goods and articles needed by the king and the royal household were stored. Sometimes, these articles were manufactured under royal supervision. Firuz Tughlaq had set up a separate department of slaves, many of whom were employed in these royal 'workshops'. The officer in charge of all these activities was called *wakil-i-dar*. He was also responsible for the maintenance of proper decorum at the court, and placing nobles in their proper order of precedence at formal receptions. Firuz also set up a separate department of public works which built canals and many of his public buildings.

Local Administration

When the Turks conquered the country, they divided it into a number of tracts called *iqtas* which were parcelled out among the leading Turkish nobles. The holders of these offices were called *muqtis* or *walis*. It were these tracts which later became provinces or *subas*. We are told that under Muhammad Tughlaq there were twenty-four provinces stretching upto Mabar in the south. At first, the *muqtis* were almost independent; they were expected to maintain law and order in their tracts, and collect the land revenue due to the government. Out of the money they collected they were expected to meet the salaries due to the soldiers and keep the balance. As the central government became stronger and gained experience, it began to control the *muqtis* more closely. It began to try to ascertain the actual income, and to fix the salaries of the soldiers and the *muqti* in cash. The *muqti* was now required to remit to the centre the balance of the income after meeting the expenditure. The auditing of the accounts, which took place after a couple of years was often accompanied by harshness, including torture and imprisonment of the *muqti*. These were relaxed by Firuz Tughlaq towards the end of the Sultanat.

Below the provinces were the *shiqs* and below them the *pargana*. We do not know much about the administration of these units. We are told that the villagers were grouped into units of 100 to 84 (traditionally called *chaurasi*). This must have been the basis of the *parganas*. The pargana was headed by the *amil*. The most important persons in the village were the *khut* (landowners) and *muqaddam* or headman. We also hear of the village accountant or *patwari*. We do not know how exactly the village was administered—it was perhaps not interfered with as long as it paid the land revenue due from it.

In the initial stage, hardly any change was made in the working of the administration at the local level. Land revenue continued to be collected in the same manner, more or less by the same set of people. This must have been a major factor in the Turks establishing their authority in the countryside quickly. The changes we have mentioned began from the time of Alauddin Khalji at the beginning of the fourteenth century, and they led to conflicts, including peasant rebellions.

Economic and Social Life

We have very little information about the economic condition of the people under the Delhi Sultanat. The historians of the period were more interested in the events at the court than in the lives of ordinary people. However, they do sometimes tell us the prices of commodities. Ibn Battutah, a resident of Tangier in North Africa, visited India in the fourteenth century and lived at the court of Muhammad Tughlaq for eight years. He travelled widely all over India and has left a very interesting account of the products of the country, including fruits, flowers, herbs, etc., the condition of the roads, and the life of the people. We have some other accounts also. The foodgrains and other crops, the fruits, and the flowers mentioned by these travellers are familiar to us. Rice and sugarcane were produced in the east and south, and wheat, oil-seeds, etc., in the north. Ibn Battutah says that the soil was so fertile that it could produce two crops every year, rice being sown three times a year. Sesame, indigo and cotton were also grown. They formed the basis of many village industries, such as oil pressing, making of jaggery, weaving, and dyeing of cloth, etc.

Peasants and Rural Gentry

As before, peasants formed the overwhelming majority of the population. The peasant continued to work hard and to eke out bare subsistence. There were recurring famines and wars in different parts of the country, and these added to the hardships of the peasant.

All the peasants did not live at the level of subsistence. Apart from the village artisans and share-croppers, there was a more prosperous section of people who were owner cultivators of their lands. They were considered the original settlers of the village, and dominated the village *panchayat*. The village headmen (*muqaddams*) and smaller landlords (*khuts*) enjoyed a higher standard of life. In addition to their own holdings, they held lands for which they paid revenue at concessional rates. Sometimes, they misused their offices to force the ordinary peasants to pay their share of the land revenue also. These people were prosperous enough to ride on costly Arabi and Iraqi horses, wear fine clothes, and behave like members of the upper classes. As we have seen, Alauddin Khalji took stern action against them and curtailed many of their privileges. Even then they continued to enjoy a standard of life higher than that of the ordinary peasants. It seems that after the death of Alauddin, they were able to resume their own ways.

A section which enjoyed a high standard of life were the Hindu *rais* or autonomous rajas, many of whom continued to hold their previous estates. There are a number of references to the visits of the Hindu *rais* to the court of Balban. There is little doubt that these Hindu *rais* continued to be powerful even in the area under the direct control of the sultans of Delhi.

Trade, Industry and the Merchants

With the consolidation of the Delhi Sultanat and the improvement of communications, and the establishment of a sound currency system based on the silver *tanka* and the copper *dirham*, there was a definite growth of trade in the country. This was marked by the growth of towns and town life. Ibn Battutah calls Delhi the largest city in the eastern part of the Islamic world. He says that Daulatabad (Deogir)

equalled Delhi in size—an index of the growth of trade between the north and the south. The other important cities of the times were Lahore and Multan in the northwest, Kara and Lakhnauti in the east, and Anhilwara (Patan) and Cambay (Khambayat) in the west. A modern historian says that on the whole 'the Sultanat presents the picture of a flourishing urban economy. Such an economy must have necessitated commerce on a large scale.' Bengal and the towns in Gujarat were famous for their fine quality fabrics. Cloth of fine quality was produced in other towns as well. Cambay in Gujarat was famous for textiles and for gold and silver work. Sonargaon in Bengal was famous for raw silk and fine cotton cloth (called muslin later on). There were many other handicrafts as well, such as leather work, metal work, carpet weaving, wood-work including furniture, stone-cutting, etc., for which India was famous. Some of the new crafts introduced by the Turks included the manufacturer of paper. The art of manufacturing paper had been discovered by the Chinese in the second century. It was known in the Arab world in the eighth century, and travelled to Europe only during the fourteenth century.

The production of textiles was also improved by the introduction of the spinning-wheel. Cotton could be cleaned faster and better by wider use of the cotton carder's bow (*dhunia*). But there is little doubt that most important was the skill of the Indian craftsmen. Indian textiles had already established their position in the trade to countries on the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf. During this period, fine Indian textiles were introduced to China as well where it was valued more than silk. India imported from West Asia high grade textiles (satin, etc.) glassware and, of course, horses. From China it imported raw silk and porcelain. Ivory was imported from Africa and spices from Southeast Asia, in return for Indian textiles. Since India had a favourable trade balance, gold and silver came to India from these countries.

India's foreign trade both overland and overseas was truly an international enterprise. Although the Arabs were the dominant partners in the India Ocean trade, they had by no means ousted the Indian traders, viz., the Tamils, Kalingas and Gujaratis, both Hindu and Muslim. The coastal trade and trade between the coastal ports and north India was in the hands of Marwaris and Gujaratis, many of whom were Jains. The Muslim Bohra merchants also participated

in this trade. The overland trade with Central and West Asia was in the hands of Multanis, who were mostly Hindus but included Muslims, who were Khurasanis, Afghans, Iranians, etc. Many of these merchants had settled down in Delhi. The Gujarati and Marwari merchants were extremely wealthy and some of them, particularly the Jains, spent large sums for the construction of temples. Cambay was a great city in which many wealthy merchants lived. They had lofty houses built in fine stone and mortar, with tiled roofs. Their houses were surrounded by orchards and fruit-gardens which had many tanks. These wealthy merchants and the skilled craftsmen lived a luxurious life, and were accustomed to good food and clothing. The merchants, Hindu and Muslim, and foreigners were attended by pages bearing swords with silver and gold work. In Delhi, the Hindu merchants rode horses with costly trappings, lived in fine houses, and celebrated their festivals with great pomp and show. Barani tells us that the Multani merchants were so rich that gold and silver were to be found in abundance in their houses alone. The nobles were so extravagent that every time they wanted to hold a feast or a celebration, they had to run to the houses of the Multanis in order to borrow money.

In those days, travel was always risky due to robbers and dacoits and various marauding tribes. However, the royal roads were kept in good shape and there were many *sarais* on the way for the comfort and safety of the travellers. In addition to the royal road from Peshawar to Sonargaon, Muhammad Tughlaq built a road to Daulatabad. There were arrangements for the post being carried quickly from one part of the country to another. This was done by relays of horses or even more efficiently and quickly by runners who were posted every few kilometres in towers which were built for the purpose. The runner continually clanged a bell as he ran so that the man on the next relay may be able to see him from the tower and get ready to take his burden. We are told that by means of these relays, fresh fruits were obtained for the sultan from Khurasan. When Muhammad Tughlaq was at Daulatabad, which was 40 days' journey from Delhi, he regularly used to receive the Ganga water for drinking purposes by means of these relays.

Economic life was quickened in the period by the improvement of communications and the growth of trade, both overland and by

sea. The Turks introduced or popularized a number of new crafts and techniques. We have already referred to the use of the iron stirrup, and a large-scale use of armour, both for the horse and the rider for heavy and light cavalry preferred by the new rulers. This led to the growth of the metallurgical industry, and metal crafts.

An even more important development was the improvement of the *rahat* (miscalled the Persian wheel) so that water could be lifted from a deeper level for irrigation. The other crafts included paper-making, glass-making, the spinning wheel and an improved loom for weaving.

Mention may also be made of the introduction of a superior mortar which enabled the Turks to erect magnificent buildings based on the arch and the dome. Not all these crafts were new, but their expansion and improvement, and agricultural growth were two of the most important factors which made the second half of the fourteenth century a period of growth and relative affluence.

The Sultan and the Nobles

The Sultan and his chief nobles enjoyed a standard of living which was comparable to the highest standard in the world at that time, viz., to the standards of the ruling class in the Islamic world in West and Central Asia. While Europe was still trying to overcome its backwardness, the opulence and wealth of the ruling classes in the Islamic world was dazzling, and set a standard which the ruling classes in every country tried to emulate. Like the Hindu rulers, almost every sultan in India built his own palace. Balban had a dazzling court which was designed to impress and strike a sense of awe in the hearts of the visitors. Alauddin Khalji and his successors followed the same tradition. The palace of Muhammad Tughlaq has been described by Ibn Battutah. A person who wanted to visit the sultan had to pass through three lofty gates which were heavily guarded. He then entered the 'court of thousand pillars' which was a huge hall supported by polished wooden pillars and was decorated with all kinds of costly materials and furnishings. This was the place where the sultan held his public court.

Muhammad Tughlaq used to present two robes of honour, one in the cold and the other in the hot season, to each of his nobles. It has been estimated that he presented 2,00,000 robes every year. These robes, woven in the royal workshops, generally consisted of imported cloth—velvet, damask or wool on which brocade and costly materials were used. They must have cost an enormous sum. Numerous gifts used to be bestowed on the nobles and others on festive occasions such as the sultan's birthday, the *nauroz* (the Persian new year), and the annual coronation day.

The royal *karkhanas* which we have referred to earlier catered to all the needs of the sultan. They manufactured costly articles made of silk, gold and silver ware, etc. They were also stores of choice and rare goods. The superintendents of the stores were instructed by Firuz Tughlaq to buy finely finished articles wherever and at whatever price they were available. It is said that on one occasion a single pair of shoes for the sultan cost 70,000 *tankas*. Most of the articles of royal use were worked in gold and silver, embroidery and jewels. The stores also catered to the women in the *haram*.

Almost every sultan had a *haram* containing queens and a large number of slaves from various countries. A large number of servants and slaves, men and women, were employed to safeguard them, and to look after their comforts. All the women relations of the sultan, including his mother, aunts, etc., also lived in the *haram*. Separate accommodation had to be provided to each of them.

The nobles tried to ape the sultans in ostentatious living. They had magnificent palaces to live in, they used costly articles of apparel, and were surrounded by a large number of servants, slaves and retainers. They vied with each other in holding lavish feasts and festivals. However, some of the nobles also patronised men of arts and letters.

Alauddin sternly repressed the nobles, but the ostentatious mode of life revived under his successors. The nobility came into its own under the Tughlaqs. Due to the rapid expansion of the empire, large salaries and allowances were given to the nobles by Muhammad Tughlaq. We are told that his *wazir* enjoyed an income as large as that of the province of Iraq. The other leading ministers got 20,000 to 40,000 tankas a year, the chief *sadr* getting 60,000 tankas a year.

Khan-i-Jahan, the *wazir* of Firuz Tughlaq, used to get 15 lakhs. His sons and sons-in-law who were very numerous got separate allowances.

During the Tughlaq period, a number of nobles were able to acquire large fortunes. Thus, Bashir, who was Firuz's *ariz-i-mamalik*, left 13 crores at his death. On the ground that Bashir had been originally his slave, Firuz confiscated most of his wealth and distributed the rest among his sons. This may be regarded more or less as an exception. The property of a noble was generally safe, and was allowed to pass on to his sons. It was this section which bought lands on which they built gardens, orchards, markets, etc. The sultan and his nobles took keen interest in improving the quality of fruits in India, especially melons and grapes. Firuz Tughlaq is said to have built 1200 orchards in the neighbourhood of Delhi.

In this way, a new type of landed gentry began to develop. The break up of the Delhi Sultanat towards the beginning of the fifteenth century halted this trend.

Town Life: Slaves, Artisans and Others

We have already referred to the revival of towns and town life under the Sultanat. The Turkish ruling class was essentially an urban ruling class with a taste for town life. Many of the towns grew around military garrisons as providers of food, goods and services to them. In due course, many of them emerged as cultural centres as well.

The medieval towns had a miscellaneous population, including many nobles and a large class of clerks for running government offices, shopkeepers, artisans, beggars, etc. The posts of clerks and lower government officials had, obviously, to be given to the people who could read and write. Since the work of teaching was largely in the hands of the Muslim theologians (*ulama*), the *ulama* and the lower officials tended to think and behave alike. Most of the historians were drawn from this section, and their writings reflect the opinions and prejudices of this section. Beggars, who generally wore arms like the ordinary citizens, formed a large mass and could sometimes create a problem of law and order.

Another large section in the town consisted of slaves and domestic servants. Slavery had existed in India as well as in West Asia and

Europe for a long time. The position of different types of slaves—one born in the household, one purchased, one acquired and one inherited is discussed in the Hindu *shastras*. Slavery had been adopted by the Arabs and, later, by the Turks also. The most usual method of acquiring a slave was capture in war. Even the *Mahabharata* considered it normal to enslave a prisoner of war. The Turks practised this on a large scale in their wars, in and outside India. Slave markets for men and women existed in West Asia as well as in India. The Turkish, Caucasian, Greek and Indian slaves were valued and were sought after. A small number of slaves were also imported from Africa, mainly Abyssinia. Slaves were generally bought for domestic service, for company, or for their special skills. Skilled slaves or comely boys and handsome girls sometimes fetched a high price. Skilled slaves were valued and some of them rose to high offices as in the case of the slaves of Qutbuddin Aibak. Firuz Tughlaq also prized slaves and collected about 1,80,000 of them. Many of them mere employed in handicrafts, while others formed the sultan's personal bodyguard. The largest number of slaves were, however, used for personal service. Such slaves were sometimes treated harshly. It can be argued that the condition of slave was better than that of a domestic servant because the master of the former was obliged to provide him food and shelter, while a free person may starve to death. Slaves were allowed to marry, and to own some personal property. However, it was widely accepted that slavery was degrading. Giving a slave his or her liberty was considered a meritorious act both among the Hindus and the Muslims.

In general, food-grains were cheap for the townsfolk during the Sultanat period. We have mentioned the price of food-grains under Alauddin Khalji. In his reign, a *man* (about 15 kg) of wheat was sold for 7½ *jitals*, barley for 4 and rice for 5 *jitals*, with 48 *jitals* being equal to a silver *tanka*. Prices rose sharply under Muhammad Tughlaq but declined almost to Alauddin's level under Firuz. It is possible that this was due to the extension of cultivation during his reign.

It is difficult to compute the cost of living in towns. A modern historian has estimated that during Firuz's reign, a family consisting of a man, his wife, a servant and one or two children could live on five *tankas* for a whole month. Thus, for a lower government official

or a soldier, living was cheap. But this did not apply to the artisan and workers in the same way. In Alauddin Khalji's reign, the wages of an artisan amounted to 2 or 3 jitals per day or about 1½ to 2 tankas per month. Household servants were paid even less. Even under Akbar, an unskilled labourer earned 2½ to 3 rupees a month, or even less. In terms of their income, the living conditions of artisans and workers in towns appear to have been hard.

Thus, medieval society was a society of great inequalities. This was reflected in the Muslim society even more than in the Hindu, the latter being predominantly rural where inequalities were less marked. In towns, the Muslim nobility led a life of great ostentation. Some of the wealthy merchants, Hindu and Muslim, also led lives of ostentation. The great mass of people, in towns as well as in the countryside, lived a simple life, and often had to face many hardships. It was, however, not a life without joy, as numerous festivals, fairs, etc., relieved, to some extent, the monotony of their lives.

Caste, Social Manners and Customs

There were hardly any changes in the structure of the Hindu society during the period. The *smriti* writers of the time continued to assign a high place to the Brahmans, while strongly denouncing the unworthy members of the order. According to one school of thinking, the Brahmans were permitted to engage in agriculture not only in times of distress, but also in normal times since officiating at sacrifices, etc., did not furnish means of subsistence in the *Kali* Age.

The *smriti* texts continue to emphasize that punishing the wicked and cherishing the good was the duty of the Kshatriya and that the right to wield weapons for the purpose of protecting the people likewise belonged to him alone. The duties and occupations of Shudras were more or less repeated. While the highest duty of the shudra was the service of the other castes, he was allowed to engage in all occupations, except to deal in liquor and meat. The ban on the study and recitation of the Vedas by shudras was repeated, but not on hearing the recitation of the Puranas. Some writers go as far as to say that not only eating a shudra's food but also living in the same house with him, sitting in the same cot and receiving religious instructions

from a learned shudra were to be avoided. This may be regarded as an extreme view. However, the severest restrictions were placed on mingling with the Chandalas and other 'outcastes'.

There was little change in the position of women in the Hindu society. The old rules enjoining early marriage for girls, and the wife's obligation of service and devotion to the husband continued. Annulment of the marriage was allowed in special circumstances, such as desertion, loathsome disease, etc. But not all writers agree with this. Widow remarriage was among the practices prohibited in the *Kali* Age. But this apparently applied to the three upper castes only. Regarding the practice of sati, some writers approve it emphatically, while others allow it with some conditions. A number of travellers mention its prevalence in different regions of the country. Ibn Battutah mentions with horror the scene of a woman burning herself in the funeral pyre of her husband with great beating of drums. According to him, permission from the sultan had to be taken for the performance of *sati*.

Regarding property, the commentators uphold the widow's right to the property of a sonless husband, provided the property was not joint, i.e., had been divided. The widow was not merely the guardian of this property, but had the full right to dispose of it. Thus, it would appear that the property rights of women improved in the Hindu law.

During this period, the practice of keeping women in seclusion and asking them to veil their faces in the presence of outsiders, that is, the practice of *purdah* became widespread among the upper class women. The practice of secluding women from the vulgar gaze was practised among the upper class Hindus, and was also in vogue in ancient Iran, Greece, etc. The Arabs and the Turks adopted this custom and brought it to India with them. Due to their example, it became widespread in India, particularly in north India. The growth of *purdah* has been attributed to the fear of the Hindu women being captured by the invaders. In an age of violence, women were liable to be treated as prizes of war. Perhaps, the most important factor for the growth of *purdah* was social—it became a symbol of the higher classes in society and all those who wanted to be considered respectable tried to copy it. Also religious justification was found for it. Whatever the

reason, it affected women adversely, and made them even more dependent on men.

During the Sultanat period, the Muslim society remained divided into ethnic and racial groups. We have already noticed the deep economic disparities within it. The Turks, Iranians, Afghans and Indian Muslims rarely married each other. In fact, these sections developed some of the caste exclusiveness of the Hindus. Converts from lower sections of the Hindus were also discriminated against.

The Hindu and Muslim upper classes did not have much social intercourse between them during this period, partly due to the superiority complex of the latter, and partly due to the religious restrictions on the part of the Hindus of inter-marriage and inter-dining with them. The Hindu upper castes applied to the Muslims the restrictions they applied to the shudras. But it should be borne in mind that caste restrictions did not close social intercourse between the Muslims and the upper caste Hindus and the shudras. At various times, Hindu soldiers were enrolled in Muslim armies. Most of the nobles had Hindus as their personal managers. The local machinery of administration remained almost entirely in the hand of the Hindus. Thus, occasions for mutual intercourse were manifold. The picture of the two communities being confined within themselves and having little to do with each other is, thus, neither real nor one which could be practised. Nor it is borne out by the evidence available to us. Conflict of interests as well as differences in social and cultural ideas, practices and beliefs did, however, create tensions, and slowed down the processes of mutual understanding and cultural assimilation. These will be dealt with in a subsequent chapter.

Nature of the State

The Turkish state in India was militaristic and aristocratic. The Turkish nobles tried, at first, to monopolize the high offices of state, denying a share to the Tajiks, Afghans and other non-Turkish immigrants. The nobility acquired a broader base only under the Tughlaqs. However, a noble birth still remained a very important qualification for high office. The vast majority of the Muslims as well as the Hindus had, therefore, little opportunity for occupying

high offices of state. Of course, the Muslims in the towns had a better chance of being enrolled in the armies and of getting state employment. The Hindus dominated trade and constituted the rural aristocracy, and the lower administrative wing without whose cooperation the state could not function. A kind of tacit sharing of power between the rural Hindu aristocracy and the city-based administrators was, thus, a factor of capital importance for the Delhi Sultanat, though there were frequent fights between these two sections. Often given a religious colour, the basic causes for the struggle between them were secular, such as fight for power and land, or rather, for the share of the surplus produced by land since land was not generally sold in those times. The Muslims also fought among themselves for the attainment of these objectives.

In a formal sense, the state was Islamic. The Sultans were keen to emphasize the Muslim character of the state, and to follow the Holy Law (*sharia*) as far as possible. This also meant not allowing any open violation of the Islamic law. They appointed Muslim divines to profitable offices of state and granted revenue-free lands to many of them. However, the sultans did not allow the Muslim divines to dictate the policy of the state. We are told that during the reign of Iltutmish, a part of Muslim divines approached the sultan, and asked him to enforce the Muslim law strictly, giving the Hindus the option of only Islam or death. On behalf of the sultan, his *wazir* told the theologians that this was impractical and impolitic since the Muslims were so little (in number) as salt in a dish of food.

The sultans had to supplement the Muslim law by framing their own regulations (*zawabit*). Alauddin Khalji told the leading *qazi* of the city that he did not know what was lawful or unlawful but framed laws according to the needs of the state. This is why the historian Barani refused to consider the state in India as truly Islamic, but one based on worldly or secular considerations (*jahandari*).

As for the Hindu subjects, from the time of the Arab invasion of Sind, they had been given the status of *zimmis* or protected people i.e., those who accepted the Muslim rule and agreed to pay tax called *jizyah*. This was really a tax in lieu of military service, and was paid on a graduated scale according to means. Women, children and the indigent, who had insufficient means, were exempted from it. The

Brahmans also remained exempt, though this was not provided for in the Muslim law. At first, *jizyah* was collected along with land revenue. In fact it was difficult to distinguish *jizyah* from land revenue since all the cultivators were Hindus. Later, Firuz while abolishing many illegal cesses, made *jizyah* a separate tax. He levied it on the Brahman also. Sometimes, the theologians who were in charge of collecting the tax tried to use it to humiliate and harass the Hindus. However, *jizyah* by itself could not be a means to force the Hindus to convert to Islam. In general, it might be said that medieval states were not based on the idea of equality, but on the notion of privileges. Before the Turks, the Rajputs and, to some extent, the Brahmans formed the privileged sections. They were replaced by the Turks. Later, the Turks and others, including the Iranians, the Afghans, and a narrow group of Indian Muslims, formed the privileged sections. The Muslim theologians were also a part of this privileged group. For the large bulk of the Hindus who were not included in the privileged group earlier, this change did not affect their daily lives which continued in the same manner as before.

Thus, while claiming to be Islamic, the state was militaristic and aristocratic in character, being dominated by a narrow clique of military leaders, headed by and under the control of the sultan.

Religious Freedom under the Sultanat

The extent of religious freedom accorded to the non-Muslims under the Delhi Sultanat may be seen in this context. In the early phase of the conquest many cities were sacked, temples being a special target partly to justify the conquest and partly to seize the fabulous treasures they were supposed to contain. During this period, a number of Hindu temples were converted into mosques. The most notable example of this is the Quwwat-ul-Islam mosque near the Qutab Minar in Delhi. Formerly, it had been a Vishnu temple. In order to convert it into a mosque, the inner sanctum which contained the deity was pulled down, and in front of it a screen of arches containing inscribed verses from the Quran was put up. Pillars from many temples were used to put a cloister around the courtyard. The courtyard has remained more or less intact. This was done in a

number of other places, such as Ajmer. But as soon as the Turks were settled, they started building their own mosques. Their policy towards temples and places of worship of the Hindus, Jains, etc., rested on the Muslim law (*sharia*) which forbade new places of worship being built 'in opposition to Islam'. But it allowed the repair of old temples 'since buildings cannot last for ever'. This meant that there was no ban on erecting temples in the villages, since there were no practices of Islam there. Similarly temples could be built within the privacy of homes. But this policy of limited toleration was not followed in times of war. Then the enemies of Islam, whether human beings or gods, were to be fought and destroyed.

In times of peace, however, within the Turkish territories and in those areas where the rajas had submitted to the Muslim rule, the Hindus practised their religion, even openly and ostentatiously. According to Barani, Jalaluddin Khalji observed that even in the capital and provincial centres, the idols were publicly worshipped and the texts of Hinduism publicly preached. 'The Hindus pass beneath the wall of the royal palace in processions, singing, dancing and beating drums to immerse the idols in the Yamuna, and I am helpless,' he said.

Despite the pressure of a section of the orthodox theologians, and the narrow approach of some of the sultans and their supporters, this policy of 'toleration within limits' was maintained during the Sultanat, though with occasional lapses. Sometimes, prisoners of war were converted, or criminals exempted from punishment if they accepted Islam. Firuz executed a Brahman on a charge of abusing the Prophet of Islam.

On the whole, conversions to Islam were not effected with the strength of the sword. If that was so, the Hindu population of the Delhi region would have been the first to be converted. The Muslim rulers had realised that the Hindu faith was too strong to be destroyed by force. Shaikh Nizamuddin Auliya, the famous Sufi saint of Delhi, observed, 'Some Hindus know that Islam is a true religion but they do not embrace Islam'. Barani also says that attempt to use force had no effect on the Hindus.[1]

1 He uses a very picturesque simile. He says that though cowed down, 'They have plucked Islam from their hearts as a hair is discarded while kneading flour.'

Conversions to Islam were due to hopes of political gain or economic advantage, or to improve one's social position. Sometimes when an important ruler or a tribal chief converted, his example was followed by his subject. In some areas, such as west Punjab, the valley of Kashmir, east Bengal, etc., where tribal peoples were induced to become cultivators, they changed their earlier beliefs, and accepted the faith of the ruling elements, in this case, Islam. In the towns, many artisans, following the new crafts introduced by the Turks, or depending on the patronage of the ruling class, such as weavers, iron-workers, paper-makers etc., converted to Islam. The Sufi saints too played a role, though they were generally unconcerned with conversions, and welcomed both the Hindus and the Muslims to their discourses. The saintly character of some of the Sufi saints created a receptive climate for Islam. There is no evidence, however, that large numbers of persons belonging to the lower castes embraced Islam due to the discrimination against them in the Hindu society or due to the influence of the Sufi saints. Conversions were, thus, due to personal, political and, in some cases, regional factors (as in the Punjab, east Bengal, etc.).

Following the Mongol invasion of West Asia, many persons belonging to prominent Muslim families fled to India. There was also a steady influx of the Afghans into India. Many of them enrolled themselves in the Turkish armies or were engaged in trade. A further influx of the Afghans took place in the fifteenth century under the Lodi rule. Despite this, the number of Muslims in India remained comparatively small. The nature of the Hindu–Muslim relations and the cultural attitudes of the two, which will be examined in a subsequent chapter, were conditioned by this situation.