



## TURKS IN INDIAN SUBCONTINENT: FROM SLAVERY TO SULTANATE

HİNDİSTAN ALT KITASI'NDA KÖLELİKTE SULTANLIĞA TÜRKLER

### Aykut KIŞMİR

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#### Abstract

In this study, the role and significance of the Turkish sultans of Delhi in the history of Indian subcontinent have been discussed. At the end of the XII century, some children, who were brought to the north of India from Central Asia for various reasons, were raised as warriors and served in the great armies. In later years, they became even able to establish the reign of Delhi. Indian subcontinent received very little impact of Mongol attacks during the reign of Turkish sultans starting from Qutbuddin Aibak. The descendants of slave children, who grew up as both statesmen and soldiers, made important reforms and organization in India during the XII and XIII centuries.

#### Öz

Bu çalışmada Hindistan Alt Kıtası'nda Delhi Türk Sultanları'nın tarihteki rolü ve önemi irdelenmiştir. XII. yüzyılın sonlarında çeşitli nedenlerle Orta Asya'dan Hindistan'ın kuzeyine köle olarak getirilen bazı çocuklar, savaşçı olarak yetiştirilerek büyük ordularda askerlik yapmışlardır. Bunlar arasında Delhi'de hükümdarlığa kadar yükselebilenler bile olmuştur. Türk Sultanlar sayesinde Kudbeddin Aybek'le başlayan süreçte Hindistan Alt-Kıtası Moğol saldırılarından mümkün olduğunca az etkilenmiştir. Hem devlet adamı hem de asker olarak yetişen köle çocukların soyundan gelenler XII. ve XIII. yüzyıllarda Hindistan'da önemli işlere imza atmışlardır.

### Introduction

The modus vivendi of Turkic people of Central Asia in 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> centuries reflected a combination of local culture and traditions with Islamic culture after their interaction and embracing of Islam. The military superiority, leadership characteristics and determination of Turks accelerated rapidly in the Islamic State during that period. Thus, the boundaries of the Islamic State were also expanded by leaps and bounds. The well accepted Turkish-Islamic synthesis in Turkistan paved the way for the sovereignty of the Turks in Central Asia and Afghanistan in 10<sup>th</sup> century (Bayur 127-128). In this context, it could be said that the Turks have a large share in shaping the history of today's Afghanistan, Pakistan and India.

The period following the collapse of the Abbasids witnessed the rise of many states within the geography of Islamic Caliphate in general because of several political reckoning. That period of confusion also influenced the peoples of Central Asia. Large migrations of people started due to political and military conflicts and battles occurring in the region. Ghaznavid empire was established in the foothills of the Hindu Kush Mountains in the north of Indian subcontinent in the year 997. Soon, the Ghaznavids dominated the Afghan tribes and thus, the Muslim Turks and other Central Asian peoples got chance to reach the north of India (Bayur127-136 and Wallbank 48).

India witnessed the domination of fighters from the north in the 10<sup>th</sup> century. The Ghaznavid empire ruled north of India from 997 to 1186 (Bajwa 17). Mahmud of Ghazni increased his power during seventeen military campaigns to India and conquered the state of Punjab making it part of reign of Ghaznavid empire. The invasions of Sultan Mahmud weakened the states in northern India and facilitated their conquests (Bulgur 6). Many sultanates continued to exist in the north and south of India after the fall of Ghaznavid empire in 1186. One of the most important among these sultanates was the Turkish sultanate of Delhi, established under the leadership of Qutbuddin Aibak. The successors of Aibak continued the reign until 1290 (Ahmed 27).

The city of Delhi is known as an important center of establishment for Turkish hegemony in the subcontinent of India. The name of the city is described as "Dihli" in literary works of Indian Muslim historians (Kortel 3). Besides, the word "Dilli" for Delhi is also found to be used in Urdu literature, especially in poetry of Mir Taqi Mir and Mirza Asadullah Khan Ghalib. The word دلی(dilli) corresponds to the city of Delhi in Urdu language (Eşref and Soydan 148). Delhi was conquered by Qutbuddin Aibak after the victory of the Tarain in 1192 against Hindus and selected as capital of his new empire (Kortel 87). The reign of Qutbuddin Aibak is not only associated to the military achievements but cultural landscape of Delhi was also changed with building important architectural structures.

### **1. Qutbuddin Aibak**

Qutbuddin Aibak became captive in his childhood in Turkestan and was sold as a slave. His owner did not treat him differently than his own sons and provided him good education. He was also taught archery and horseback riding. After the death of his owner, Aibak was sold to Muhammad of Ghor and later became one of the most trusted generals of Ghori. He escalated the power and glory of his sultan

with the courage and successes he showed in the battles. In India, he fought many Rajput princes and ensured the safety of Muslims. In 1194, he besieged Aligarh and participated in the Benares expedition sultan in 1195. He played an important role in the conquest of the Ajmer fortress and contributed to the transformation of many temples into mosques. Sultan used to appoint Aibak as head of soldiers during his visit to Ghazni after every successful expedition each year. He was also involved in strengthening the management in the seized areas and sent some of the booty back to the Sultanate captured during wars with Hindus. Aibak became important warrior who was appreciated by the Sultan and was also loved by other soldiers. During this period, waves of Turkic people started to enter India, settled adjacent to conquered places and formed small principalities. Qutbuddin Aibak opened the way and the future of slave dynasty through so-called slave successors from 1206 to 1290 which played active role in management of Delhi sultanate and brought up of sultans.

Aibak, a dynamo in the army, also gave importance to building architecture in Delhi alongside his military achievements. The minaret of the *Quvvat-ul Islam Mosque*, which is one of the prominent historical remnants of present-day Delhi, started to be built in the time of Aibak. Qutb Minar, also called the minaret of the Qutbuddin, is considered a monument of victory. The construction was completed by the successors of Aibak after his death. Muhammed Ghori declared Aibak as his heir in India before his death. Aibak was dealing to consolidate the Ghori management in Lahore to keep the Punjab under control while Muhammad Ghori died. Soldiers and gentlemen in the army presented their devotion to Qutbuddin and proclaimed him as sultan on hearing the news of the death of Muhammad Ghori. There were many rebellions taking place in Punjab, Ghazni and Ghor when Muhammad Ghori died. Aibak failed to return to Delhi because of the political instability. He was compelled to spend most of his later life in Lahore and four years later in 1210 he fell off the horse while playing Polo.

## **2. Iltutmish**

Iltutmish, just like Qutbuddin Aibak, was also kidnapped by the slave dealers in Turkistan and sold in Ghazni. He was taken to Delhi by the permission of Sultan Ghori and acquired by Qutbuddin Aibak. He was raised as a good warrior and became one of the faithful and trustworthy commanders of Aibak. Later, Qutbuddin arranged Iltutmish's marriage to one of his daughters. There was no male heir of Aibak, the throne passed to his son in law Iltutmish who became the

sultan after death of Aibak. Until 1229, Iltutmish struggled hard to deal with many rebellions in the dynasty made by state members, governors and adversary opponents who wanted to declare independence.

In 1229, the Caliph of Baghdad sent his ambassadors to Iltutmish with honorary caftan and edict from Caliph. It was symbolized that Iltutmish was known by the Caliph as Sultan of India and ruler of the places he had seized. Thus, the Sultanate of Delhi (the Muslim-Turkish state of Delhi) was formally recognized in the Islamic World (Bayur).

The news of Mongolian army led by Genghis Khan reaching the Indus Valley was considered a biggest danger for Iltutmish's sovereignty over India. Iltutmish managed to keep the danger away from Delhi using his diplomacy skills and prevented possible attacks on the city while the Mongols were pursuing their enemies (Bajwa).

Khalaj people from northeast India were also contemplated as another serious threat by Iltutmish. Khalajs were dominated in vast territories of Bihar, Bengal and northeast of India. They remained under control during Qutbuddin's era but remained a continuous threat to Delhi.

Iltutmish fell sick during his expedition to Punjab in winter of 1235-36 and died in May 1236. After the Aybek, He got unique position in history of Turkish-Islamic emperors of India by uniting the country that was about to be torn apart and providing integrity in and around Delhi. He is well known for expanding his dominance in all over India despite the threat of Mongol invasion. The construction of the famous Qutb Minar was completed during the reign of Iltutmish. Iltutmish, rising from slave to sultan, made numerous reforms in India and laid the foundation of the project of silver currency that would be precursor of the unit rupee used as a currency in India and Pakistan today.

### **3. Razia Sultana**

Iltutmish appointed his daughter Razia Sultana as his heir apparent before his death despite the presence of his sons. The reason behind the decision was his disappointment from his sons to be able to administer the state as they were more interested in entertainment affairs (Bayur). However, nobles of the state elevated Iltutmish's son Ruknuddin Firuz to the throne and declared him the Sultan despite clear will of Iltutmish. Soon, as anticipated by Iltutmish, Firuz undertook the state affairs very lightly and spent most of the time in entertainment. The administrative

decisions were taken out under the influence of his mother Shah Turkan. Shah Turkan's policies mopped and exacerbated the Turkish nobles of the court who were considered themselves the heirs of Aibak and Iltutmish. Shah Turkan was ambitiously against the Razia Sultana, who was her step daughter, and had a desire to eliminate her. Once, during the Friday prayer, Razia came out of the balcony of the palace near the big mosque and openly told the people about Turkan's intentions to kill her as she had already killed her brother before. The masses became agitated while listening her (Galip and Gömeç 73-74). After the incident, the rebellion broke out and eventually Firuz and Turkan Shah were captured and killed in 1236. Later, Razia was elevated to the throne and declared sultan by the people of Delhi and part of the Army despite many opponents. Razia Sultana is one of the rare women who ruled the state in the world of Islam. Razia Sultan was a smart, wise and courageous woman. She took strong measures to crush the rebellions and managed to hold the throne. However, forty of the Turkish gentlemen of Iltutmish era had already dominated the state affairs. The main obstacle for Razia to control all the state affairs exclusively was being a woman. She kept the throne for only three and a half years. Her half-brother Behram took over the throne after her assassination in 1240.

#### **4. Council of Forty (Chilanghan)**

After the death of Iltutmish, Turk seigniority that was ascended from slavery emerged as an effective force in the Sultanate of Delhi. These gentlemen were known as "Chilanghan" (Bayur) who represented the state's high authority. These influential people, consisting of forty Turkish think tanks, prevented the Mongolian Army from making major destruction in India. In later periods, they became so strong in the Delhi-Turkish sultanate that they were even able to elevate and eliminate heir of Iltutmish's dynasty and replace him with another. In 1240, the council of forty (Chilanghan) removed Razia Sultana from the throne and replaced her with Behram as new emperor in 1242.

In general, "the council of forty" hold true sovereignty in their hands by making solidarity among them. They prevented taking over the throne by any one among them, instead they were removing and elevating the person of their choice as sultan from the descendants of Iltutmish (Bayur 287).

After Behram, one of the grandsons of Iltutmish, Aladdin Masud, was elevated to throne as sultan. Four years later, Masud was deposed in 1246. Later, the youngest son of Iltutmish, Nasiruddin Mahmud, was appointed as sultan at the age

of 17. He remained sultan for twenty years from 1246 to 1266. However, he was not much indulged in state affairs and most of the time remained engaged in his personal hobbies and interests. He was interested in Islamic calligraphy. He spent most of his time writing and duplicating verses from the Qur'an with his own handwriting (Hussain 144). The real power dealing with the state affairs was Balaban, one member of the council of forty.

## **5. Balaban Khan**

Balaban, a slave from Kipchak tribes of Turkistan who became prisoner in childhood by Mongolians, was bought by Iltutmish in Delhi in 1232. After the death of Iltutmish, he became a sought-after leader during chaos of Delhi with his trustworthiness and superior services. Balaban was the most cunning and cruel member of council of forty. He first got the position of "Khan" in the period of Nasiruddin Mahmud, and later on his regency rose with the title of "Ulugh Khan" (Merçil 324).

In 1249, Sultan Nasiruddin Mahmud married Balaban's daughter and thus, Sultan and Balaban became relatives. His influence was so strong that whole army was paying homage to Balaban. He was trying to regulate administrative affairs using his influence in the state. The Sultan was devoted to Islam. Although he was on the throne but never interfered with the government's administrative affairs. Balaban fought with the Mongols at first and later he also fought with governors and Hindus who tended to rebel. There was a grudge, hatred and hostility against Balaban in the council of forty.

Balaban was dealing with Mongols, Nobles and rebels while struggling to prevent the political intrigue of the Iltutmish's dynasty. Meanwhile, thieves, bandits and gangs started to rise in the boundaries of the Sultanate of Delhi. The environment filled with lack of security and deterioration of trust began to disturb the society. At the same time, the conflicts in the state and the problems within gentlemen provided the Hindus with opportunities and disorder, lawlessness and robbery started to be evolved at large scale. So much so bandits stole many camels of army during the Mongol raid at the end of 1257 making the army immobile. Balaban made a relentless expedition against them and killed many of them in 1260 (Bayur 295-296).



Balaban seized the powers of council of forty after the death of Nasiruddin Mahmud in 1266 keeping all the powers in his hand and kept the throne of sultanate by himself as there was no heir remained from Iltutmish's descendants. He tried to resolve state-run disorder and shortcomings. He reformed the grooming system and reorganized the discipline in the army. In 1270, he repossessed the city of Lahore after Mongols, and rebuilt it. The thieves, bandits and gangs were immediately intervened in and punished. He managed to clean forests, bridges and passages from gangs and thieves by establishing deterrent stations and secured transportation, trade and communications.

The biggest problem for Balaban was neither the bandits nor the rebels nor the Hindus. His main concern was the Mongol invasion because they were a great danger to the Sultanate of Delhi. His son and heir apparent Muhammad was appointed as the governor of Punjab. Muhammad was a brave warrior, battled the Mongols many times across the border, and was also a visionary and enlightened leader. He showed keen interest in development of language and literature, and even invited the great poets of the period, such as Amir Khusrau to improve the cultural standing of Lahore. However, died in a collision with the Mongol army in 1285. Balaban also died only a year after his favorite son and successor Muhammad's death in 1286 at the age of 80.

After the death of Balaban, the throne changed from one to another among his sons and grandchildren who were both incompetent and hostile to each other. The Khalajs, who were in majority in the army gathered their hands and thus, in 1290 the reign of sovereign slaves in the Turkish sultanate of Delhi ended and the era of the Khalaj dynasty started.

## **Conclusion**

The Turkic people in Central Asia attained important position among Muslims after embracing Islam in 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> centuries and established Muslim many states. The hegemonies of Turks in Central Asia and Indian subcontinent during 10<sup>th</sup> century and place of Delhi Sultanate played vital role in the process of formation of the Indian-Turkish Empire. The Turkic leaders like Qutbuddin Aibak and Iltutmish took strong initiatives in the development of a stable management system in the Indian subcontinent. Moreover, the sultans of Delhi sultanate also made robust efforts protect the state from Mongol attacks. Besides, Turkish sultanate of Delhi also shaped the Indo-Turkish architectural and cultural landscape by building

monuments and great mosques and it also played important role in the history of Islam in Indian subcontinent.

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