

Chapter VI

Mahmud Ghaznavi as a General

His Statesmanship

During his reign of thirty two years Mahmud extended his empire over the whole of the country now known as Afghanistan, the greater part of Persia, and Transoxiana and the Punjab. As a statesman Mahmud was very strict. He was very strict in the implementation of justice. He enforced respect for law by all means at his disposal and within his empire nobody could plead rank or birth as an excuse for leniency or exceptions treatment. When used for debts by a merchant of Ghazna, prince Masaud could only escape being summoned before a Qadi, only by an immediate settlement of the claim. Sultan Mahmud was a poet and scholar also. He is said to have been the author of the book named, “Tafridul Fura” which was regarded as a standard work on ‘Fiqh’. He took part in the religious and literary discussion of the scholars at his court with a healthy interest of a learned Muslim.

The Sultan was a great patron of learning and his court was the rendezvous of scholars from all parts of the Muslim world. Crowds of poets sang his praises and he is said to have spent on them 400,000 dinars annually. Mahmud had great passion for collecting scholars at Ghazni containing a vast collection of valuable books on variety of subjects.

The Sultan was punctuous in the performance of his religious duties. He offered the usual prayers regularly and read the Quran daily. In the month of Ramzan he set apart the Zakat or 2.5% tax on property which usually amounted to a large sum, and spent it in alleviating distress. In addition to this, he daily distributed alms among the poor and granted handsome allowances to scholars and disabled persons, in his empire. He usually give monetary help to the volunteers who accompanied him on his Indian expeditions. He wished to perform a pilgrimage to Mecca but could not do so on account of political reasons.

The Sultan was not a fanatic ruler. He believed in the religious unity of the state and severely punished all diseridents. His hostility to the carmathians was accentuated by the intolerant attitude of the caliph of Baghdad towards them in the third century. The political colour which rivalry between the caliphs's of Baghdad and cairo lends to Sultan's persecutions of the carmathians, takes much of the fanatic out of him. When his mind was not biased by such considerations, he showed a

laudable spirit of toleration for religious differences. In India for example, he is not said to have forced any Hindu to abjure his religion or to have put any person to death on account of his beliefs. He had however, the missionary spirit in him and the preacher invariably followed in the wake of his victorious army. Mosques were erected anywhere where he occupied and preachers were appointed. Some Hindu Rajas said to have embraced Islam but they did so most probably as a political shift to escape the fury of the conqueror.

The Hindus enjoyed toleration under the Sultan. They were given separate quarters in Ghazna and were permitted free observance of their religious ceremonies. The critics who accuse Sultan of ‘want on Bloodshed’ and reckless spoliation of Hindu temples, forget that these so called barbarities were committed in the course of legitimate warfare. When such acts are sanctioned by the practice of all the great conquerors of the world, spoils captured from defeated enemy has always been considered the lawful property of the victorious army.

The Sultan had a great fondness for architecture. The wealth accumulated by successful wars was spent in beautifying the capital and provincial towns. Before proceeding on his expedition to Kannauj in 1008 he ordered the construction of a magnificent mosque at Ghazna of makeable and granite and of exquisite design and workmanship. Attached to this mosque

was a library which was enriched by works of rare value collected from all parts of the empire, and university on which rich endowments were settled for current expenses and for salaries and stipend to professors and students. The nobles were not slow in following the lead of the Sultan and vied with each other. The result was that in short time the capital Ghazna was ornamented with palaces, mosques, porches, gardens, reservoirs and aqueducts.

Very little is known about the public works of the Sultan. A market at Balkh, a bridge over the river oxus and the Ban-i-Sultan (the Sultan Dam) across the river Nawar about 18 miles to the north of Ghazni are almost all mentioned by Historians.

In fact, when we go through all the literature on Mahmud we reach at the conclusion that Mahmud was a general of limited caliber. He was an advocate of strict discipline and a man of humble nature. He dealt successfully with all the problems which came before him. He was not admired by any body because of his statesmanship or qualities of a good general but people in India were only afraid of him because of his repeated raids and indiscriminate killings and looting.

His Generalship

Socrates once described the qualities of a general in the following words. “The General must know how to get his men their rations and every other

kinds of stores needed for war. He must have imagination to originate plans, practical sense and energy to carry them through. He must be observant, sample and crafty; a wathman and a robber, lavish and miserly; generous and stingily; rash and conservative. All these and many other qualities natural and acquired he must have. He should also as a matter of course know his tactics, for a disorderly mob no more an army than a heap of building materials for a house".¹

A general must possess high morale and sound judgment, alertness for mind, initiative, imagination and foresight. He should be more than an active and industrious man, but one who does not forget one thing to execute another. The personal conduct of the general should be well reasoned that his dissimulation will be so profound that no one can penetrate it. A general should practice kindness and appear friendly to the soldiers. His principal tak is mentale, involving large projects and major agreements.

The above mentioned qualities must be possessed by an efficient general and one can find most of these qualities in Mahmud. Mahmud was a brilliant commander in the field. As a dashing cavalry leader, he had no equal. Mahmud fought in the front ranks of his army and usually plunged into the thickest of the battle. "He is said to have received seventy two cuts and wounds".²

During his numerous battles. At the siege of Multan he killed so many of the enemy that his hand was stuck fast to the hilt of his sword with congealed blood and had to be immersed in a bath of hot water before it could be loosened. It was the Sultan's personal valour and fearlessness of danger which inspired his soldiers with confidence and enthusiasm even in moments of extreme despair.

According to professor S.R. Sharma, "Mahmud was a seasoned soldier, fear did not find any place in his heart. His army against the rulers of India 'Like a comb through a poll of hair'. Forts and cities surrendered as the great Sultan passed by, object chief placed their followers at his disposal. He fought when necessary but more often triumphed by mere prestige".³

Mahmud as a general may be considered in respect of his four outstanding traits viz. As a genius, as an strategist as a tactician and as a leader.

As a Genius

Sultan Mahmud was endowed with a genius for war. He was scientific in his attitude, skilful in planning and thorough in execution. His brilliant victories equal the exploits of Alexander the great in east. His field of action extended from Iraque to the Ganges Doab and from Khawarizm to Kathiawar, and with his wide arena he moved and fought for thirty three years with matchless energy and success, sometimes fighting against the

whole might of Turkistan and sometime bidding defiance to the united provinces of north India.

His genius was evident in the battle against Chandela king in 1019, when he reached the bank of Ram Ganga river there was a confederacy of kings for fighting against him. He did not loose his heart, and immediately decided to embark his soldiers on the other side of the river. Mahmud thus gave surprise to his enemy. When his soldiers all of a sudden embarked and attacked them. This surprise attack created stamped and panic in the enemies ranks. According to Havell, “Mahmud was endowed with all the qualities of a prince and reflected luster upon the faith”.⁴

Thus, this example of the battle of Chandela shows that Mahmud was no doubt a military genius. He always took immediate judgements. He employed very cleverly the shock and the blitzkrieg tactics.

As a Strategist

Sultan Mahmud was a great strategist as well. His strategy succeeded in every battle. It was the strategy that made him victorious in all battles. He planed everything before leaving Ghazni. The supply to his army, the horses, elephant and what their roles was to be in the battle fields, and how they were to be deployed in the bottle fields.

As a strategist his wit and his strategic genius was very much evident from the battle of Somnath. He moved from Multan to Somnath on 26

November 1025, the entire way was through deserts, Mahmud therefore loaded 30,000 camels with water for his army. The total distance covered by Mahmud from Multan to Somnath as about 1000 miles and this long way was covered by him in only 42 days in spite of all the hindrances created by local kings and princes in the long way.

Thus we see that Mahmud was very prudent in dealing with unforeseen contingencies. He could easily foresee the situations likely to occur in field area or in peace time.

As a Tactician

“On the opening page of his great work on war Clausewitz makes a very simple. Yet profound remark. “War is nothing but a dwell on an extensive scale”.⁵ The primary elements of tactics are to be seen in their simplest form in a fight between two unarmed men. They are to think, to guard and to hit. In military term there are four tactical principles of war as the aim or object, security, mobility and offensive power. There were three accentuating elements of war they were as, economy of force, concentration of force and surprise.

The above mentioned all the qualities and principles were employed by the army of Mahmud. Mahmud did not add anything to the tactics. He blindly followed the tactics of his ancestors, that can be called ‘shock tactics’ in

modern terminology. He accepted what he found ready to his hands, viz the tactics of the old royal armies of the Somanids in which he had served as an apprentice. He however infused into the old system a new life with his energy. His armies consisting of such heterogeneous elements as Arabs. Khaljis Afghans, Torkomans, dalamites and Hindus were under his iron discipline, welded together into one invincible whole.

Generally before Mahmud's time and during his time also whenever a battle was planned the army was divided into five major divisions.

- (i) Advanced Guard
- (ii) Right Flank
- (iii) Left Flank
- (iv) Centre
- (v) Rear Flank

Mahmud was very much conscious of fast speed of his action and therefore he thought that the near was useless for him. It was his tactical initiative that he always divided his army into four division and in none of his battles we find him to suffer any loss because of deviating from the age old system of making five parts of the fighting army.

As a Commander

“Battles now are so vast, so complex and so dependent on the handling of reserves that a general-in-chief can no longer lead his army into action; he

directs it from an elaborately organized head quarters which may be 100 or more miles behind the battle front and the leadership of his men is delegated not to his more senior, but to his most junior officers".⁶

In the battles of classical age too a general or the leader of army played very important role. And his personal qualities in the battle field were of paramount importance.

Mahmud Ghazni was a great leader. He had every virtue of a good leader. He was a man of infinite courage. "Inglorious ease was little to the warriors taste. He exposed his body to all the fatigues of marching, bivouacking and skirmishing on the border land of his extensive empire. His summers were usually spent on the plains of India. Neither heat nor cold nor even the natural barrier could prevent him from waging a desperate war. The inaccessible mountains of Ghur, the snow-clad hill passes of Kashmir, the foaming rivers and the territorial rains of India, the alkaline of wastes of Punjab, the parched deserts of Rajas than, nothing stood in the way of his indomitable will. His rapid march surprised his enemies. He thundered of the gates of Multan while the rebellion Sukhpal was slumbering in security, and the surrendered the town Qusdar before its ruler was well aware of his approach. Even when he was in the grip of his fatal malady, the swiftness of his movement surprised Minichir and forced the Seljakes to clear out of Khurasan".⁷

Mahmud was very particular in welfare of his armymen. He paid salary in cash and the payments were made in time. Mahmud has raised the prestige of his army to a very high degree during his period recruitment in army was a matter of respect and army was a honorable profession.

A great general must be a great leader. Mahmud was a great leader. It was the Mahmud's leadership which makes him victorious everywhere, from Khurasan to Bukhara from Ghazni to Punjab and to eastern coast in Gujrat.

His Leadership

Numerous books and articles have been written on leadership and leaders. Leadership is one of the most difficult terms to define. In every human activity there is need for the guiding hand of a leader. It is not difficult to explain leadership in a few simple words. It is the ability, call it the touch, of a leader to inspire a group of men to willingly, and indeed enthusiastically, do what the leader wants them to do to achieve a goal irrespective of impediments. What is the ability a leader should have; what are the qualities which men respect especially when under stress; and how to cultivate these qualities?

Leadership is the biggest single factor which counts in the outcome of a clash of arms. The primary difference between military leadership and leadership in other walks of life comes of a unique and indeed an exceptional requirement which a good military leader is required to

possess. A military leader has to inspire and motivate the men he is leading to such an extent that they are ready to lay down their lives. To achieve this, he must be prepared, and must be seen by his troops to be so prepared to always risk his own life. In no other walk of life, job or employment, a sacrifice of this magnitude is expected from a man as a normal facet of his duty, and it is this facet for which a military leader has to be groomed. An officer who inspires troops to go into attack, knowing fully well that many among them will die, is aware how awesome is the burden of military leadership the burden of leading your fellow citizens, your friends and your comrades to their death. The vocation of a military leader is for more demanding than leadership in any other occupation.

There is continuous quest for a single text that reduces leadership to a set of learnable skills. We continue to believe that no such book exist. Leadership is a process of human interactions involving an infinite variety of individual personalities and specific situations, there is no one pattern or formula that will assure leader effectiveness, there is no one right answer.

Leadership is increasingly viewed as a shared responsibility between those appointed to leader roles and those expected to follow. Good leadership is easily recognized and appreciated. Although it is one of the most observed and studied concepts in the modern world, precise definitions and measurements nonetheless remain elusive. There are as many definitions

and descriptions of leadership as there are people who write and speak about it. Leadership starts with a vision for the future. What sets leaders apart from others is an ability to see and put into perspective what others can not. The vision is not a daydream rather; it is a goal for future state of affairs for an organization and its people. The vision becomes a drive, a commitment, and a focus of energy.

The definitions of leadership given by military leaders are of special importance to us. It would be in the fitness of things to consider a few of them here and study the aspects emphasized in them. Field Marshal Montgomery said, ‘Leadership is the capacity and will to rally men and women to a common purpose and the character which inspires confidence. In this definition the main emphasis is on leader’s capacity and will, his behavior, in rallying men and women to a common purpose. The purpose might not have been common to start with, but it devolves on the leader to ensure that it is perceived as common by the group members. In fact, the relationship of leaders effectiveness with the perception of commonality of purpose by group members becomes clearer when we consider the definition of leadership given by field Marshal Slim. According to him, leadership is the projection of personality. It is the combination of persuasion, compulsion and example, that makes other people do what you want them to do. Following the same refrain, General Eisendhower

observed, leadership is the knack of getting somebody to do something you want done because he wants to do. As is clear, in these definitions overriding importance has been given to the behaviour of the leader. The reason for this could be:

A military leader starts functioning with his positional authority well defined for him as well as his group members.

Neither the problem to be solved or goal to be achieved is chosen by the military leader, nor has he much say in the selection of his group members. These two are ‘given’ aspects of his role.

The military leader is primarily held responsible for achievement of the goal.

In the light of these observations, there is a need to consider military leadership in a manner which gives weightage to the given of a leaders role. At the same time, it also must bring into focus the importance of the characteristic of group members and nature of the situation in the dynamic process called leadership. It can be said, ‘Leadership is the ability of a person to mobilize and direct the effort of his group members for solving the group problem by relating himself to the characteristics of the group and sensitizing himself about the nature of the problem. Though this

definition also emphasizes the role of the leader in the practice of leadership, yet it makes heavy demands on him to relate himself to the group and understand the problem. This effort is sure to restrain his tendency to dominate and drive the group members. In other words, this definition looks at leadership effectiveness in terms of leader's situational sensitivity and flexible style of functioning. Since situations keep changing, therefore, the leader too must keep acquiring new knowledge, new skills and more appropriate attitude for mobilizing and directing the effort his group members for the achievement of the group goal.

Some other definition of leadership are:

“Leadership is idealism in action, “Sai Baba” leadership is not something you do to people.

It is something you do with people”.

‘Ken Blanchard and patricia in leadership and the one Minute Manager.

“A successful leader is one, who should have a profound understanding of human nature, the knack of soothing out troubles, the power of winning affection while communicating energy and the capacity for ruthless determination, where required by circumstances, he need to generate on electrifying current, and keep a cool head in applying it”. – Liddell Hart “It is surprising how much you can accomplish if you do not care who gets the credit”.

“Believe me, whether you command ten men or ten million men the essentials of leadership are the same”. Field Marshal Slim.

“A group of people can often be dominated by the one person who sees most clearly” General

“Many qualities go to make a leader, but two are vital ability to make right, and the courage to act on the decisions”. – Montgomery.

An Estimate of Mahmud as A General

Mahmud was one of the greatest Muslim kings of Asia who ruled over a vast dominion which extended from Iraq and the Caspian sea to the Ganga and was more extensive than the empire of the caliph of Baghdad. This empire was practically created by him. He had inherited from his father the provinces of Ghazni and Khurasan only. Mahmud was a thorough-going despot in whose hands were concentrated all power and authority. His ministers were his servants and creatures who could be appointed and dismissed at will. Mahmud's will had the force of law. He was the chief executive and judicial authority of his kingdom and he was also his own commander-in-chief. His powers and prerogatives were limited only by the customary Muslim law and by the fear of a military rising. But Mahmud discharged his duties in his home kingdom successfully and maintained law and order. These achievements entitle him to a high place among the

monarchs of the time and show that he was gifted with considerable administrative ability.

Mahmud was a brave soldier and a great general. It is said that he was not gifted with extraordinary personal prowess, but he was fearless and extremely intrepid. As a general his success lay in making a clever use of the extant material and in infusing a new life into the old system then in existence. He was a judge of human character and understood and appreciated the qualities of his subordinates and troops and thus he made each individual contribute to his success in the manner in which he liked and to the extent to which each man was capable of contributing. He was a born leader of men. His army was not a homogeneous force; it was composed of diverse racial and religious elements, such as Arabs, Afghans, Turks and Hindus. But his able generalship welded them all into a powerful unit. It is sometimes supposed that Mahmud displayed conspicuous military capacity against the then effect Hindus only and hence his generalship has been unduly exaggerated. This is a mistaken view, for we know that he attained equal success in Central Asia and in Persia.

Mahmud was a cultured patron of scholarship and art. He had himself some skill as a poet and a scholar. He beautified the city of Ghazni by erecting stately palaces and mosques, colleges and tombs. He gathered

around him scholars of ability and reputation. He held religious and literary discussions with them at his court. Among the topmost literary lights that thronged the court of Ghazni, the most important were Al-Beruni, Firdausi, unsure and Farrukhi. His secretary was the famous Utbi, to whose scholarship we owe not a little material for a history of Mahmud and his time. Mahmud founded university at Ghazni. He also collected brilliant artists from all parts of the Muslim world.

Mahmud enjoyed a reputation for his great sense of justice in his kingdom. According to a great authority, "Mahmud was a just sovereign, a lover of learning, a man of generous nature and a pure faith". He was an orthodox Sunni Musalman punctilious in the observance of his religious rites. He was careful to see that his Muslim subjects did not deviate from Sunni orthodoxy. He punished heresy and persecuted such heretics in Islam as the Karmathians.

According to Professor Muhammad Habib of Aligarh Muslim University, Mahmud was not a fanatic and his expeditions against India were not motivated by religion but by love of plunder. The learned Professor concludes by saying that Islam does not sanction plundering raids and Vandalism and that Mahmud rendered disservice to his religion by his acts of barbarism in India. That Mahmud was a deeply pious Muslim king and punctilious in the observances of his faith was not a subject of controversy

with contemporaries who believed that the ruler of Ghazni was an ideal Islamic monarch. Likewise, contemporary Muslim opinion is unanimous in its belief and assertion that Mahmud not only rendered a great service to his religion by his Indian expeditions, but even exalted Islam. As regards the view that Islam does not sanction vandalism and atrocities of the type committed by Mahmud, it may be said that a student of history is not concerned with the dogmas of a religion. He has to assess their effect on the conduct and actions of its adherents. It is an incontrovertible fact that those who were qualified to interpret the principles of Muslim religion, during the lifetime of Mahmud and for centuries after his death, held the view that ruler of Ghazni not only did not depart from strict Islamic principles, but glorified them by his conduct in India.

To the Indian world of his day Mahmud was a varitable devil incarnate – a daring bandit, an avaricious plunderer and wanton destroyer of Art. He plundered many dozens of our flourishing cities; he razed to the ground great temples which were wonderful works of art; he carried thousands of innocent women and children into slavery; he indulged in wanton massacre practically everywhere he went; and, above all he forcibly converted hundreds of our unwilling people to Islam. A conqueror who leaves behind desolate towns and villages and dead bodies of innocent human beings cannot be remembered by posterity by any other little.

Mahmud was not a ruler so far as India was concerned. He annexed the Punjab after the fall of the Hindushahi dynasty, owing to geographical, military and strategic reasons.

Without occupying this part of the country his line of communications would have been unsafe and he would not have been in a position to move fearlessly into the heart of the Ganga-Yamuna Doab. Yet Mahmud became the founder of the Turkish power in India, for he paved the way for the establishment of the future Sultanate of Delhi. His ability even as a ruler has been exaggerated.

Professor S.R. Sharma calls him an angel to his own people. On the other hand, he did little beyond giving his dominions peace and order. No permanent institution and no nation building activity was associated with his name. if he did a little for education, it was not for the people at large, but for a select class and for personal glorification. Lane-poole is right in concluding: "He left his dominion so ill-knitted together that they began to fall asunder as soon as he was no longer alive to guard them by his vigilant activity". His inordinate fondness for wealth was a blot on his character, as it weakened rather than strengthened his usefulness and his reputation. The story of his refusal to pay Firdausi a gold piece for every verse of his celebrated Shah Nama to which he was pledged, and that of his death-bed sobs at the thought that he was leaving his riches behind, may not have

been literally true, but they do reflect the popular opinion of his character long after he was dead.

In spite of these faults he must be called a monarch of out-standing ability, if not character. Professor Habib is right when he says that Mahmud's pre-eminence among his contemporaries was due to his ability and not to his character.

References

- ¹ Journal of U.S.I., Delhi, 1950, p.7.
- ² Nizamuddin, “*Life and Times of Sultan Mahmud of Ghazni*”, p.199.
- ³ S.R. Sharma, cited by V.D. Mahajan, “*The Delhi Sultanat*”, p.34.
- ⁴ Havell cited by V.D. Mahajan, “*The Delhi Sultanate*”, p.35.
- ⁵ J.F.C. Fuller, “*The Generalship of the Alexander Great*”, p.292.
- ⁶ Ibid., p.292.
- ⁷ Ibid., p.304.