

## **Understanding Political Evolution in Early Medieval South Asia: A Comparative Analysis of Political Management of Ala-al-Din Khalji (r.1296-1316) and Muhammad Bin Tughlaq (r.1325-1351)**

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### **Abstract:**

*Political development in South Asia in the medieval period manifests evolutionary trends. This evolution owes its existing to the discursivity that engages politics with religion, culture, social standards and geography. Political ideologies, structures and deliverance remains relative and reflexive in the wake of a continuous discourse. This paper examines the process of political evolution during Sultanate period by comparing the development in political ideology, institutional structuring and policy making in the reigns of Ala-al-din Khalji and Muhammad bin Tughlaq. Besides, this paper also examines the comparative impacts of idealistic and pragmatic steps taken by Muhammad bin Tughlaq and Ala-al-din Khalji.*

**Keywords:** South Asia, Sultanate, Divine right of Kingship, Caliphate, The Forty

### **I. Introduction**

Muslim rule in subcontinent is expanded on centuries and presents diverse examples of politics and governance. Presence of diversity over a long period of time endorses the fact that both political and governmental issue have remained in discourse rather than falling a prey to inertia. This discourse included religion, society and culture to participate and negotiate their part in political culture and governmental structures. The element of continuous negotiation is evident from the fact that all these participants have been varying their position with the change of monarch or with a regime change. Sultanate period was not politically static and at the same time also did not bear any revolutionary color. It can be speculated as a period of political evolution in which political development reflected the religion, society, culture and geography. Sultanate period (1206-1526) is divided into Slave dynasty, Khalji dynasty, Tughlaq dynasty, Sayyid dynasty and Lodhi dynasty. (Malik, 2012, p. 92-94) Each time, a dynastic change is described as a revolutionary change but in historical sense it was more a part of political evolution. This evolutionary spirit of the Sultanate period can be examined and described from different angles. These angles include the process of institutionalization of empire, variations in ideological basis of rule, patterns of socio-political development and historical prism. In a way, historical method of excavating the evolutionary spirit of Sultanate period encompasses the rest of angles in its research fold. This paper intends to investigate the mechanism of political evolution in Sultanate period by comparing the historical development in the regimes of Ala-al-din Khalji and Muhammad Bin Tughlaq.

This comparative study of two monarchs will discursively analyse their contexts, family background and governance patterns. It will be observed that in what way these monarchs were the part of this political evolution and to what extent they were effective. Study is designed to exhibit both the individual and collective spheres of the political process during the two regimes. An extraordinary individuality may fail to become an effective part of a collectivity on the other hand an ordinary part may fit in a collective body appropriately. This paper is divided into four parts. Initially an effort will be made to understand the contextualization of these monarchs in the broader Sultanate period and within their own families. At second, a comparison will be drawn on the basis of their political ideologies and conceptions of kingship. Thirdly paper will discuss their management of challenges posed by nobility. Brief overview of implementation of policies will be held by comparing their expansionist intentions and practice at the end.

## **II. Brief overview of the trends in early Sultanate period**

Early Sultanate period is marked as the period of political superiority of Turks. Slave dynasty is characterized with the notion of Turkish superiority. (Mehta, 1986, p. 96-98) Qutb-al-din Aibak, Shams-al-din Iltutmash and their descendant maintained the political and administrative spheres with the remarkable and superior position of their Turkish fellows. (Ibid) This racial prerogative was not only maintained in the royal cadre but was also ensured in the cadre of nobility. The construction of the famous 'Forty' well defines the situation. (Malik, p. 96) A council of forty Turkish nobles was established to help the monarch in the exercise of their administrative and political authority. This council was composed of the slaves who were well trained in administrative, political and military spheres. They served the purpose of administering and defending the Turkish rule in India very well. They enjoyed posts in the central administrative structure as well as they were also assigned duties in the provinces. At certain instances of time, even, Sultan seemed to be first among the equals. Weak Sultans were better enjoyed by this cadre of Turkish nobles. Ghayas-al-din Balban (r. 1266-1287) who exceptionally rose to the rank of Sultan also belonged to this group. He was remarkable in manipulating the political conditions and utilizing his Turkish card. He was the last great monarch of this period of Turkish superiority. This Turkism was so much dominant that, even, it superseded the religious affiliations. Sultan, the defender of faith and propagator of Shariah, could not allow equal position to the new Muslims and Muslims from the other racial groups. New Muslims and Muslims with other racial and ethnic affiliations were only meant to serve at inferior positions in the administration.

The second aspect which distinguishes early Sultanate period is their orthodox religio-political position. Early two Sultans kept the Islamic ideals of piety intact. (Qureshi, 1958, p. 26-28) They integrated the Islamic symbolism in their personal and official manifestations. They incorporated the Islamic ideals of kingship in their political conceptions. As mentioned above, a sultan was propagator of Shariah and defender of faithful. They were also supposed to make arrangements for the surety of Islamic concepts of justice and equality. These requirements were met by the establishment of certain offices i.e. *Sadr-al-Sadur*, *Qadi-al-Quda*, *Muhtasib* etc. (Schimmel, 2003, p. 14) these offices were assigned to the people having expertise in Islamic Fiqh and Shariah. They were not only paid generously but at the same time were revered by the monarchs in high estimation. Their verdicts were administratively protected and applied. Besides all this, the most important step in this regard was the affiliation of sultanate with the

Caliphate. (Qureshi, p. 27) Early sultanate period observed the suzerainty of Caliph and monarchs urged letters of manumission from the Caliphs in Baghdad. (Malik, 102) This connection helped the monarchs in three ways. At first, Caliphate was a sacred institution, especially in Sunnite Islam and it was the duty of orthodox Sunni Muslims to be connected with the Caliphate and offer their loyalties to the real Commander of Faithful. Monarchs held great respect for the Caliphs. At second, the letters of manumission from the Caliphs helped early monarchs of Sultanate period to grab and exercise political authority. They, by sorting legitimacy from Caliphs, justified their rule in the eyes of Muslims in India. Muslim populations in India conferred credibility upon the monarchs after being known of the fact that they were testified by the Caliph of Islam. In third sphere, this connection helped the Sultans in adding to the prestige of their rule in the eyes of non-muslim population of India. It made clear to the non-muslims that the rulers are not merely representing a particular racial group but in fact they are the representatives of an international political system. This aspect added to the dignity and value of their rule and authority in India.

Early sultanate period is also characterized by the observance of structural approach and well defined system. They defined the position of monarch and provided him with well-designed principles to follow in the dispensation of administrative and political assignments. The second socio-political sphere in the monarchies is known as nobility. Early Sultans not only had a clear and manifested role of nobility before them but also had constructed a definite body of 'the forty nobles' to conduct administration and political business of the Sultanate. (Malik, p. 87-100) They also had a clear distinction of center, provinces and peripheries in the commencements of administration. Besides putting a strong center and well-integrated provinces, they maintained the observance of local institutions of justice and local outlook of tax collecting process to infuse a sense of satisfaction and confidence in the public at large. An overall analysis of the early Turkish period reveals that this was the age of Turkish superiority, Muslim orthodoxy and administrative structuralism. This part will help to distinguish the early sultanate period from the period of Khaljis and Tughlaqs. Coming part will describe the position and status of Khaljis and Tughlaqs who ruled India after the end of era of Turkish dominance.

### **III. Turning the Trends: Establishment of Khalji and Tughlaq Dynasties**

After a brief analysis and description of the early sultanate period which is marked with conformity of race and religion and integrity of administration, this part describes the Khalji and Tughlaq families to have a broader contextual understanding of Ala-al-din Khalji and Muhammad Bin Tughlaq. It is not only a different description but a real turning point in the history of sultanate period. (Jackson, 1999, p. 61) The sober Turkish tradition would seem to be replaced by untraditional clans like Khaljis and Tughlaqs. Khaljis, before assuming the office of Sultan were notorious for their social conduct. They were considered uncivilized and were held responsible for many disturbing activities in society. (Ibid, p.61-86) It can be argued that their coming to the most prominent position was a moment of surprise for the people although they had some superior political ranks in the provinces like Bihar and Bengal. Bakhtiar Khalji (d.1206) held the provinces as these were bestowed upon him by Muhammad Ghori. (Ibid) Second exception in this regard is Jala-al-din Khalji who by following the different hierarchies of Indian administration rose to the office of Sultan. (Mehta, p. 127-28) Except these two examples, clan was mostly employed in ordinary administrative posts and military

services. Although they had Turkish origin yet they had no politically privileged pedigree. They were not considered to be the part or copartners of Turkish political elite in Central Asia, Afghanistan and India. This was the scenario in which Jala-al-din Khalji assumed the power. He was wise enough to gauge the level of his and his clansmen's popular identity. This is because he abstained from moving to Delhi after acquiring the highest office for a period of one year. He knew that his the aristocratic environment of Delhi would not easily digest his prominence so he waited for a year and decided to move after winning the hearts of nobility there by conferring political offices and privileges. (Mehta, p. 30) He also earned respect by avoiding sitting on the throne of his master Ghaya-al-din Balban. It was a diplomatic move to ensure people of his modesty and commitment with the tradition. He compensated his traditional pedigree by respecting the tradition and managing the symbols of authority in a modest way. His gestures earned credibility and his rule gained a moral justification onward.

Similar circumstances were faced by the Tughlaqs as well. They, too, lacked the traditional authority to rule. (Qadir, 2014, p. 310) They were unable to connect themselves with any dominant group of muslim statesmanship. They belonged to an inferior Turkish origin and were also accused of being a mixed clan. (Ibid) Tughlaq is also said to be a vulgarized version of Qutlugh. Ghazi malik, who was later entitled as Ghayas-al-din Tughlaq after acquiring the reigns of Inida was the son of Ulugh Khan. Ulugh Khan held service in the regime of Khaljis. His son Ghazi Malik rose to the position of governor of Dipalpur in the reign of Ala-al-din Khalji. Like Jala-al-din Khalji, Ghazi Malik also held a great respect for his Khalji masters and when khalji rule was obstructed by Khusrau Khan, he refused to accept him as monarch. Meanwhile he held secret connections with Mubarak Shah Khalji. After the unlucky end of Khalji dynasty by Khusrau Khan, Ghazi Malik fought a battle with the later and got rid of him. Observing the loyalties with Khaljis he offered the family of Ala-al-din to present a male heir but none was left. (Qadir, p. 308-9) In these circumstances he availed to opportunity of becoming Sultan of Delhi. It is evident from the conduct of Jalal-al-din Khalji and Ghayas-al-din Tughlaq that they did not had any royal lineage yet they had respect for their former traditional masters. (Mehta, p. 33, 187) This respect for the tradition helped them to carve their political ways in the establishment of firm rule in India. They laid the justification of their rule on the respect for the traditional lords and on the basis of their personal merits and political capacities. So these were the trends which laid basis for the firm political standings of Ala-al-din Khalji and Muhammad bin Tughlaq. Following part contains a comparative discussion on the theoretical understandings of the two monarchs.

#### **IV. Theories of Kingship of Al-al-din Khalji and Muhammad bin Tughlaq**

Ala-al-din Khalji, apparently, seems irresponsible as far as the construction of theory of his kingship. At first instance he tried to distance himself from the traditional expositions of sultanate connections with Caliphate and divine right of monarchy. He consciously did so as he avoided announcing any public denunciation of these two theoretical models. He was only not at ease with their prevalent understandings. His ideological inclinations impelled him to be more than a representative of God or a Caliph. As a monarch, he wished to be above the ranks of a representative. He managed accordingly and translated the divine right of monarchy not in terms of representation but announced himself as 'shadow of God'. (Mehta, p. 141) He claimed divine reflection rather than representation. It gave him more powers and authority than one could have availed in the traditional exposition of divine rights. It also helped him not only to

differentiate himself from the common people but also from the nobility and clergy. A shadow of God had more authority than the religious experts. This management was also based on a doctrine of necessity which demanded a stern action against the ambitious nobility. He had observed the behavior of nobility with his predecessors. He managed this power by claiming a divine authority. His conscious management of theory of kingship is also evident from the fact that even by claiming divinity he, symbolically, did not disrupt his connection with the caliphate. Although he had not written any appeal for legitimacy to Caliph but his title, *Yamin ul Khilafat Nasiri Amir ul Momnin* (Right hand of Caliphate and assistant of leader of faithful), still preserved this traditional connection. (Qureshi, 29-32)

Muhammad bin Tughlaq, on the other hand, also had complicated circumstances to devise and manage his theoretical foundations of rule. He was believer in the divine right of monarchy which was translated by him in terms of selection of God. (Welch & Crane, 1983, p. 123-166) He managed to distinguish 'selection' from representation of God and shadow of God. In his view 'selection of God' bears more legitimacy than the people with acquired claims. For example, he distinguished his superior powers from the religious scholars and jurist on the basis of being 'selection of God'. Traditionally, sultans of Delhi avoided to interfere in the religious issues and held extraordinary respect for the religious clergy. Muhammad bin Tughlaq based his superior claim not only on the basis of divine selection but he was also well versed in the different branches of Islamic knowledge and claimed to be a jurist as well. (Qadir, p. 356) At second, like Ala-al-din, he was very conscious in dealing with the symbolic relationship with Caliphate. He avoided to make any contact with caliph at an early stage of his rule but at the same time had not omitted the name of Caliph from the coins. He only wrote for an investiture of legitimacy from the Caliph of Cairo at a later stage, at the end of almost two decades of his rule in 1343. (Malik, p. 106) This is understandable in the wake of administrative and political problems in the empire. Applying for a caliphal legitimacy was to compensate the internal weaknesses and enhance the credibility in the eyes of subjects. So from beginning till end, he consciously followed a route to designs his conception of rule.

Besides discussing the conceptual basis of Ala-al-din Khalji and Muhammad bin Tughlaq, another point is also very important. Historians have also mentioned that both monarchs intended to acquire a supreme religious role. They have also translated their wish as an urge to acquire a Prophetic/Caliphatic place but this end must be treated with utmost care. (Qureshi, p.29) Whether they wished or not but a fact is clear that they never had any public claim of the Prophetic offices and the religious connotation of their theories of kingship is also based more on the administrative and political necessities. Proceeding part of the paper will try to elaborate these administrative and political necessities.

## **V. Reconstruction of Nobility**

Above section described the frames through those the monarchs intended to be identified in the public. These political ideals had two-fold working mechanism. At one end, it reflected the expansionist approach of the monarchs and described the extent to which they intended to exert power. At second, it also showed that how they intend to deliver i.e. in capacity of a shadow of God or as a selection of God. Their respective ideological stands on the definition and extent of authority required particular ways and means through those they could practically demonstrate their vision. (Auer, 2017, p. 1-

25) In practical terms, these ways and means of bringing the royal will to the level of its implementation in public is the structure of civil and military bureaucracy. This cadre was filled by nobility. (Ojha, 1978, p. 122) Theoretical exposition also defines the role and limits of this connecting class. Both monarchs, before announcing the policies and reforms, adjusted the ranks of nobility to have a refined selection for civil and military bureaucracy. These adjustments also owe their existence to the absence of well-defined noble class like 'the forty'.

Ala-al-din managed the nobility in three steps. At first he favored his friendly nobles at the time of his accession by conferring upon them the highest posts in different central departments and in provincial management. (Mehta, p. 140-1) The list of these royal family members and nobles include Khawaja Khatir, Almas Khan (entitled as Ulugh Khan), Malik Sanjar (Alp Khan), Malik Hazbaruddin (Zafar Khan) and Alaul Mulk. (Ibid, p.138) Besides placing his friends and relatives in bureaucracy, he confirmed the Jalali Noble in their former positions. (Ibid, p.140) This policy was adopted for a short period of time and at later stage he introduced changes. Second step, in this regard is the persecution of those Jalali nobles who had favored Ala-al-din by deserting and deceiving Ala-al-din Khalji. They were blamed to be untrustworthy on the basis of their treacherous behavior with the former monarch. He took back the luxuries they had been offered before and also blinded and beheaded many of them. In third move he turned his attention to his own friendly group in the nobility and managed their positions according to his own will. Many of them were deprived of the office they had and other had to face the change of duties. (Malik, p. 102) This reshuffling proved fatal for the authority of nobles and for the time being they felt helpless against the moves of Ala-al-din Khalji. Abolishment of zamindari and introduction of salaries added to the decreasing authority of nobles.

Similar spirit was preserved in the reign of Muhammad bin Tughlaq. He also believed in the centralization of authority and giving fewer powers to nobility. (Malik, 104-5) He adopted a different mechanism than Ala-al-din Khalji. He adopted certain other measures as well besides using his direct absolute authority. At first instance, he was a scholar monarch who possessed the knowledge of different field of life. His knowledge bestowed upon him an elevated place and was acknowledged by nobility as well. His speech acts contained wise content and very attractive communication capacity. He established a well-deserved authority upon his nobility by delivering the most influential speeches in the court. (Qadir, 329-30) He always interfered in the business of his ministers and officers. At second, as mentioned in an earlier part, that he also claimed to be a jurist, he curtailed the agency and influence of the religious scholars. (Schimmel, p. 20) The third move which, indirectly, was directed to lessen the authority of noble and aristocratic class was the change of capital from Delhi to Daulatabad. Elite social cadres in Delhi were reluctant to move towards Daulatabad but they were compelled to join the new capital by Muhammad bin Tughlaq. (Mehta, 198-203) Although they were allotted lands and were given luxurious incentives yet they were feeling insulted on account of the forced migration.

## **VI. Policies of Geo-political Expansion**

Ala-al-din Khalji and Muhammad bin Tughlaq, both had imperialistic visions and both wanted to become conquerors. (Jackson, p. 156) They intended to expand their political influence beyond the geographical boundaries of Indian Subcontinent. They had

to face a two way challenge in adopting a policy of expansion. At first, they faced the challenge of bringing India in one geo-political entity. At the time of their respective successions, India was divided into different states. More challenging part in India was played by Deccan in the South. Besides internal disintegrating problems they also had to face the challenge of Mongols who had been continuously attacking from the northwest frontiers. (Gulati, 1985, p. 22-40) In the wake of almost similar challenges, both of them reacted in different manner.

Ala-al-din, as mentioned above, bore the wish to be a conqueror like Alexander and to cast his sway over the maximum of globe. He managed this dream with a pragmatic approach. He was once advised by Alaul Mulk that he needed to relinquish the dream of conquering the whole world and attach his attention to politically unifying the Indian geographical diversity. (Mehta, p. 144) He was wise enough to learn from the advice and afterward he limited his attention within the boundaries of India. For this purpose he devised a threefold policy. Firstly, a strong standing army was felt necessary to defend the frontiers. He took extraordinary steps to strengthen his military. Abolishment of zamindari, upgrading of war equipment and payment of soldiers in cash salary were the main steps in this regard. Soldiers were not only recruited by the central government but also were paid directly. (Ibid, p.166-72) At the same time their recruitment process also included their specifications regarding their ranks and salary. Soldiers were divided on the basis of their talent and capacity and were given appropriate weapons of war and horses. They were also inspected by the monarch after a particular interval of time. This arrangement was supported by comprehensive economic and agrarian reform. Economic and agrarian reforms directly and indirectly supported the maintenance of large standing army. Fixation of prices, for example helped the government to acquire the military services on specific payments. (Malik, p. 102) Additionally, Ala-al-din adopted pragmatic policies while dealing with mongols and the challenges from the South. (Hamdani, 1986, p. 115-123) He got the knowledge of geo-political realities of the South India before having any war adventure in this region. He appointed spies to have a better understanding of the routes and the rest of geographical features of that area.

On the other hand Muhammad Bin Tughlaq never gave up the dream of conquering the territories beyond India. He was not only interested in political and geographical unity of India but was also anxious to go beyond it. Khurasan expedition (1332-33) and Qarachal expedition (133-34) are the proof of his dream. Both expeditions were completely unsuccessful and added to the disrespect of the Tughlaq monarchy. At a second, he introduced token money for the payment of soldiers instead of introducing solid economic reforms on the pattern of Ala-al-din Khalji. (Ibid, p. 104) This experience also proved fatal for the economy of the state. The problem of South India was resolved in the more interesting and surprising way. Instead of dealing with Deccan from Delhi, capital was shifted to Deccan. Delhi was replaced by Daulatabad. (Ibid, p. 105) It was designed to serve two purposes. At one end it saved the capital from the continuous attacks from Mongols and on the other hand it enabled the Sultan to have an acute eye on the affairs in Deccan. He was more an idealist monarch as compared to a pragmatic Khalji.

## VII. Conclusion

The comparative analysis of Ala-al-din Khalji and Muhammad bin Tughlaq sufficiently elaborated the process of political evolution. This comparative analysis successfully proved the argument that the whole Sultanate period is not ornamented with some generalized patterns but is divided into some distinct parts. This distinction among the different parts of the Sultanate period is achieved by the respective monarchs and regimes not on the basis of certain revolutionary designs but with an ever-present spirit of evolution. Change of capital, for example, by Muhammad bin Tughlaq is supposed to be altogether a popular step but tradition tells us that it was not he but some of his predecessors also had their capitals other than Delhi. Similarly Ala-al-din's intentions, to attach some divine attributes with his political power, could have been traced back in the human history. This spirit of evolution which was based on borrowing from the past also reflected itself in the coming parts of the Sultanate period and even after the end of the Sultanate period, in the period of the Mughals in India.

Besides proving the spirit of political evolution, this paper also concludes that pragmatism and a practical approach of Ala-al-din Khalji casted successful and permanent impacts on the History of Muslim rule in India as compared to the more scholarly and idealistic Muhammad bin Tughlaq. It does not mean that the latter failed, but it reveals that the former managed the realities of his time and space more attentively than the latter.

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