



DELHI SULTANATE I. POLITICAL AND CULTURAL HISTORY

i. POLITICAL AND CULTURAL HISTORY

Although the influence of Persian civilization upon that of northern India under the sultans of Delhi has long been treated as a foregone conclusion, attempts to identify the extent of the processes by which that influence was transmitted involve the historian in a web of hypotheses and generalizations (for the historiography of the sultanate, see Hardy, 1960; Rashid; Hasan; Sarkar; Nizami, 1983). As Carl W. Ernst (p. 6) has expressed it, “‘influence’ is nothing but a rather physical metaphor suggesting a flowing in of a substance into an empty vessel. This is hardly a satisfactory model for the complicated process by which people of one culture interpret and put to new uses themes and symbols from another culture.” Because of its origins and subsequent history the sultanate provided for three and a quarter centuries a unique opportunity for the continual transmission to India of a broad range of cultural manifestations emanating from the Persian plateau: language and literature, customs and manners, concepts of kingship and government, religious organization, music, and architecture.

Persian influence in northern India before the sultanate. Islam had already entered India via Sind and up the Indus; by the late 10th century Ismaʿili



communities had been established in and around Multan, but they were **Carmatians** from **Bahrain** and probably constituted a wholly Arab element. The seepage of Persian influences into northwestern India resulted, in the first instance, from the transfer of political power on the Persian plateau from 'Abbasid governors to local dynasts. The early Saffarids Ya'qūb b. Layṭ (d. 265/879) and 'Amr b. Layṭ (d. 289/902) exercised a loose sway over what are today the Indo-Afghan borderlands, in which dissidents from the Persian plateau had probably established themselves free from 'Abbasid surveillance (Bosworth). The Samanids (204-395/819-1005) later extended their hegemony over the same area, including the Kabul valley, Gardīz, Ġazna, and Zābolestān, leading to penetration of these lands by Persian or persianized officials, traders, and adventurers. Under their aegis rebellious slave commanders like **Alptigin**, Sebūktigin, and the latter's son Maḥmūd used Ġazna as a base for raids across the Indus and into Hindustan. A century later the Saljuq vizier Neẓām-al-Molk, in his *Sīāsāt-nāma* (p. 147), described these raids, emphasizing that plunder and adventure, as much as piety, had motivated them. The Ghaznavid Maḥmūd himself (388-421/998-1030) may well have viewed these raids as providing the means to play an active role on the Persian plateau, but after the defeat of his son Mas'ūd (421-32/1031-41) by the Saljuqs at Dandānqān in 431/1040 the fulcrum of Ghaznavid power shifted east into the Punjab, and Lahore became the capital of the rump empire. The later Ghaznavids, though ethnic Turks, were wholly assimilated to Persian culture; Persian was the language of the court, and Ghaznavid Lahore must have been a typical Persian city. The first flowering of Persian poetry on Indian soil took place there, led by **Abu'l-Faraj b. Mas'ūd Rūnī**, the panegyrist of Sultan Ebrāhīm b. Mas'ūd (451-92/1059-99) and his son Mas'ūd III (492-508/1099-1115), and Mas'ūd-e Sa'd-e Salmān (Marek, pp. 714-15). It was also in Lahore that 'Alī b. 'Oṭmān Hojvīrī, whose *Kašf al-maḥjūb* was one of the earliest accounts in Persian of Sufi theory and practice, finally settled and died (ca. 465-69/1072-77; Hojvīrī, pp. x-xi).

Although the ethnic origins of the Ghurid, or Shansabanid, dynasty (ca. 390-612/1000-1215) remain uncertain, there can be no doubt that the conquest of Ġazna by the Ghurids' Turkish *gōlāms* in 545/1150 marked the end of Ghaznavid rule west of the Indus. The last two Ghaznavids, ẖosrow Shah (547-55/1152-60) and ẖosrow Malek (555-82/1160-86), controlled only the Punjab, and under their rule the cities there must have experienced further persianization. In 582/1186 the Ghurid ruler Ġiāṭ-al-Dīn Moḥammad (558-99/1163-1203) occupied Lahore, where he established a condominium



with his younger brother Mo'ezz-al-Dīn Moḥammad, to whom he delegated the eastern and southern possessions of the dynasty. Thenceforth Mo'ezz-al-Dīn was responsible for the extensive conquests in Hindustan. Delhi was captured in 588-89/1192, Ajmer in 589/1193, and Qannauj in 595/1198; Ghurid suzerainty thus extended in a great arc from Mount Abū in Rajasthan through Gwalior to Bundelkhand. Farther east Baḳtīār Ḳaljī proceeded into Bihar and Bengal in 599-601/1202-04, capturing the cities of Nadia and Lakhnawti (Jūzjānī, *Ṭabaqāt* I, pp. 422-32). Following the assassination of Mo'ezz-al-Dīn in 599/1206 his territories were partitioned among his principal amirs: Tāj-al-Dīn Yildiz in Ġazna; Nāṣer-al-Dīn Qobāča in Multan, Uch, and Bhakkar; and **Qoṭb-al-Dīn Aybak** in Lahore, Ajmer, and Delhi, the last city being held by his lieutenant Šams-al-Dīn Iltutmiš. In Bihar and Bengal the situation remained fluid: Baḳtīār had either died or been assassinated, and successive commanders endeavored to hold those distant provinces and to determine the basis of their legitimacy by dealing with various power brokers in the northwest (Eaton, 1993, pp. 38-39). Eventually Aybak emerged more or less supreme, though he had had to come to terms with Qobāča and probably, contrary to tradition, never assumed the title "sultan." Nor was his son Ārām Shah able to succeed him after his premature death. His successor was his favorite *ḡolām*, the far-sighted and resolute Iltutmiš (607-33/1211-36), who is counted the first and among the greatest of the sultans of Delhi.

The Turkish *ḡolāms* of the Ghurids who laid the foundations of Muslim rule in India were no barbarian conquerors; rather, despite their origins in Central Asia, they were effective agents and purveyors of Persian civilization on the subcontinent. Aybak himself had, as a young slave, been educated by a *qāẓī* (religious judge) in Nīšāpūr, where he had acquired a reputation as a reciter of the Qur'ān (Jūzjānī, I, p. 416). Iltutmiš had belonged to a learned man of Bukhara, who educated him thoroughly before selling him to a merchant, who took him to Baghdad and thence to Ġazna (Jūzjānī, I, p. 442). Qobāča, too, seems to have been a man of considerable polish; it was in his time that the *Čāč-nāma* was rendered from Arabic into Persian, and he provided temporary refuge from the Mongols for both **Šadīd-al-Dīn 'Awfī** and Abū 'Amr Jūzjānī. He appointed the latter to a position at the Fīrūzīya *madrassa* at Uch, which may have been his own foundation (Jūzjānī, I, p. 420). The biographical notices on prominent amirs of the early Delhi sultanate incorporated into Jūzjānī's *Ṭabaqāt-e nāṣerī* confirm the impression of a cultivated persianized ruling elite. The earliest surviving buildings erected by the sultans of Delhi also reflect Persian antecedents (see ii, below).



The Ghaznavid and Ghurid invaders constituted a well-defined ruling elite, reinforced by adventurers of all kinds from the Muslim lands farther west. Neẓām al-Molk reported that, after news of the booty that Alptigin had acquired in the Indus frontier region became known, men flocked from Khorasan, Transoxania, and Sīstān to serve under him (Neẓām-al-Molk, p. 146). Few of these early invaders would have brought wives with them, relying principally upon Indian slave women to provide for their domestic needs and bear them sons. Apart from soldiers, little is recorded about early migrants from Persia and the borderlands into what later became the Delhi sultanate. There must have been writers from the Ghaznavid court at Lahore and in the late Ghurid period *‘olamā’* like Jūzjānī. It can be assumed, too, that among immigrants to northern India there were armorers, metalworkers, tentmakers and furnishers, manufacturers of cavalry gear, and other craftsmen, though none is mentioned in the sources. Merchants must have followed the armies to convert the plunder (often unwieldy and practically useless in the hands of common soldiers) into cash; the vast majority of Indian captives must thus have become objects of commerce. Traders and craftsmen alike most probably came from urban centers in the eastern Persian world and, with bureaucrats and *‘olamā’*, provided the nucleus of the free, nonmilitary Persian-speaking population of such centers as Multan, Uch, Bhakkar, Lahore, Dipalpur, and Bhatinda in the Punjab, as well as Delhi.

The dynastic history of the sultanate. Iltutmīš was succeeded by five descendants, the last of whom died in 664/1266, but usurpation and murder more often determined the succession at Delhi. In that year his former *gōlām* Ġiāṭ-al-Dīn Balban seized the throne, ruling for two decades (664-86/1266-87) in grim splendor amid the trappings of “Sasanian” kingship (Nizami, 1961, pp. 95-105); after his death his grandson and great-grandson were soon ousted, and the throne was then seized by the Turkish or turkicized Ẕaljīs (689-720/1290-1320; on this dynasty, see Haig; Nigam; Lal, 1967). After the murder of the last of the line, Qotbā-al-Dīn Mobārak Shah (716-20/1316-20), by his favorite the sultanate was restored by Ġāzī Malek, governor of Dipalpur (Punjab), who mounted the throne as Ġiāṭ-al-Dīn Toḡloq and founded the Tughluqid dynasty (720-817/1320-1414), under which the sultanate of Delhi reached its greatest extent but also experienced the beginning of fragmentation into smaller states. Ebn Baṭṭūṭa described Ġāzī Malek as a Qarā’ūnā Turk from southern Afghanistan, though in India the term Qarā’ūnā may have meant descendants of Turks by Indian mothers (Ebn Baṭṭūṭa, III, p. 649). Under the Tughluqids, especially Moḥammad b. Toḡloq (725-52/1325-51)



and Firūz Shah (752-90/1351-88), the Delhi sultanate reached the zenith of its splendor (on the Tughluqids, see Haig; Husain, 1938; idem, 1963). Even before Tīmūr's devastating raid on Punjab and Delhi in 800/1398-99, however, the Tughluqid state had contracted to a mere shadow of its former self, and the adventurers who ruled after Tīmūr's withdrawal, Mallū Khan, Dawlat Khan Lōdī, and Keẓr Khan, had no claims to legitimacy and controlled little more than the countryside immediately surrounding Delhi. Keẓr Khan's successors came to be known as the Sayyed dynasty (817-55/1414-51), probably because of spurious claims to descent from the Prophet Moḥammad; they were eventually swept away by the Lōdīs (855-932/1451-1526), themselves part of a larger infiltration of Afghan tribes into the Punjab and the Ganges plain, from which local dynasties also eventually emerged in Bengal and Malwa. The most significant legacy of the Sayyeds and Lōdīs was architectural. The last Lōdī sultan was killed at Panipat fighting the invading forces of Bābor.

Although the extent of Persian immigration into India before the 1220s is a matter of guesswork, events during the 13th century undoubtedly contributed to an increase. The garrison towns and administrative centers in the upper Jumna-Ganges plain (e.g., Baran, Etawah, Badaon, Qannauj) must have become even more persianized after the arrival of successive waves of refugees from the west. The first such wave was the result of campaigns by Čengīz Khan in Transoxania and Khorasan in 616-19/1219-22; he actually reached the Indus in 618/1221 and briefly threatened the Punjab (Jovaynī, ed. Qazvīnī, II, pp. 139-42). Many fugitives sought sanctuary in Delhi during the reign of Iltutmīš and undoubtedly stimulated a greater diffusion of Persian customs and values in lands that had previously been unstable marches on the frontiers of the Islamic world. Jūzjānī is an example, having fled from Tūlak south of Herat, arrived by boat in Uch, where he was warmly received by Qobāča, and then passed on to Delhi, where he enjoyed a moderately successful career in the service of the sultanate (Jūzjānī, I, pp. 420, 447).

The Mongol invasion of Persia continued into the 1250s, and it must be assumed that the exodus also continued, though presumably limited to persons of means or possessing marketable skills. A further stage in the spread of Persian influence must have followed Hülegü's invasion of Persia in 653-56/1255-58; many refugees crossed the Indus during the reign of Sultan Nāṣer-al-Dīn Maḥmūd Shah (644-64/1246-66), and the impetus may have continued during the late 1270s and 1280s after the Negüderis or Qarā'ūnās had occupied Zābolestān in what is now southern Afghanistan, a region that



became a bone of contention between Il-khanids and Chaghatayids (see [CHAGHATAYID DYNASTY](#)). The latter successfully asserted their hegemony in the borderlands northwest of the Indus and engaged in protracted internal dynastic struggles between Mongol traditionalists and those newly converted to Islam (e.g., 'Alā'-al-Dīn Tarmašīrīn, 726-34/1326-34). Among the refugees who came to Delhi was the party with which Ebn Baṭṭūṭa traveled in 734/1333. The most prominent member was the *qāzī* of Termed, who was accompanied by his women and children, three brothers and a nephew, and two notables from Bukhara and Samarqand respectively, each with an entourage of servants and hangers-on (Ebn Baṭṭūṭa, pp. 606-07). This group was probably typical of such refugees, representing high Persian culture. Sultan Moḥammad b. Togloq was especially renowned for his hospitality to foreigners (see Jackson), among whom the "Korāsānīs" (a term used indiscriminately in Delhi to include refugees from Persia proper, the borderlands across the Indus, and Turkestan) were especially numerous. Ebn Baṭṭūṭa mentioned the sultan's practice "of honouring strangers and showing affection to them and singling them out for governorships or high dignities of state" (p. 595). ". . . Well known is his generosity to foreigners, for he prefers them to the people of India, singles them out for favour, showers his benefits upon them . . . and confers upon them magnificent gifts" (p. 671). When the Il-khanate in Persia collapsed in 736/1336 Tughluqid Delhi provided a *carrière ouverte aux talents*, thus ensuring that Muslim India would become a cultural extension of Persia.

Perhaps more than elsewhere in the Muslim east, the political style of the rulers of Delhi reflected traditional concepts of Persian kingship, for Iltutmish and his successors lacked any other obvious tradition to draw upon (Hardy, 1978a). Indigenous Rajput polities offered no meaningful exemplars, and it is unlikely that the Turks in northern India retained memories of the steppe *imperium* of the Oğuz or Qarakhanids. The 'Abbasid caliphate had provided a legitimizing mechanism, but its demise in 658/1258 left a mere fictive device. On the other hand, the culture of the courts of eastern Persia, that is, Samanid Bukhara, in whose service Alptigin had grown gray (Neẓām-al-Molk, p. 139), and the persianized milieux of the Ghaznavids and Ghurids offered a dynamic, ultimately Sasanian concept of *šāhānšāhī* to set against contemporary Hindu notions of kingship or the threatening universalism of the Chinghizids. This concept could be harnessed to the idea, prevalent from the time of the first Mongol incursions across the Indus, that the central functions of the rulers of Delhi were chastisement of the idolaters of Hindustan and defense of the sultanate against the Mongol infidels (Ahmad, p. 12). In his determination to



enhance his authority Ġiāt-al-Dīn Balban, who claimed descent from Afrāsīāb, sought to overawe his turbulent followers with the splendid ceremonial of pre-Islamic Persia (Nizami, 1985, pp. 148-52). It is surely no coincidence that his grandsons were named Kay Ḳosrow, Kay Qobād, Kay Kāvūs, and Fīrūz. The greatest poet of the Delhi sultanate, Amīr Ḳosrow Dehlavī (651-725/1253-1325; see Rypka, *Hist. Iran. Lit.*, pp. 257-59), in his *Qerān al-sa'dayn*, an account of the reconciliation of Balban's son Bōgrā Khan, ruler of Bengal, with his own son Mo'ezz-al-Dīn Kay Qobād in 686/1287, glorified the external symbols of kingship and authority. 'Esāmī, with his *Fotūḥ al-salāṭīn*, composed in the Deccan in 750-51/1349-50, aspired to write the *Shāh-nāma* of India.

By the time of Amīr Ḳosrow's death Persian was firmly established as the language of polite learning, diplomacy, and higher administration among the Muslims of the subcontinent. This success owed as much to the diffusion of the Sufi orders throughout northern India, especially during the 14th century, as to elite patronage of panegyric and belles lettres. The process had begun a century earlier, with the establishment of Mo'in-al-Dīn Češtī (q.v.; d. 633/1236) in Ajmer, Ḥamīd-al-Dīn Nāgawrī (d. 675/1276) in Rajasthan, and Qoṭb-al-Dīn Baktiār (d. 633/1235) in Delhi (Lawrence, pp. 20-44). From them flowed the great Češtī tradition in India, embodied in Qoṭb-al-Dīn's disciple Farīd-al-Dīn Mas'ūd "Ganj-e Šekar" (664/1265); the latter's spiritual heir, Neẓām-al-Dīn Awlīā' (d. 725/1325), who counted the poets Amīr Ḳosrow Dehlavī and Amīr Ḥasan Sejzī (d. 729/1328) as his friends; and Awlīā's successor, Nāṣer-al-Dīn Maḥmūd "Čerāg-e Dehlī" (d. 757/1356). Other orders, notably the Sohrawardiya and the Ferdowsiya, had established themselves after the Turkish invasions, the former chiefly in the Punjab, the latter in Bihar and Bengal (Lawrence, pp. 60-71, 72-79). At the time of Tīmūr's invasion of Hindustan (800/1398-99) the leading disciple of Čerāg-e Dehlī, Moḥammad Ḥosaynī "Gīsū Derāz" (d. 825/1422), abandoned Delhi for the Deccan, where he established himself at Golbarga (Eaton, 1978, pp. 50-52). By that time, however, Sufis had spread far and wide through Muslim territory in India. Their propensity to preserve their conversations (*malfūẓāt*), letters (*maktūbāt*), and hagiology (*taḍkera*) in Persian did much to encourage dissemination of that language. Little survives from before the time of Awlīā', but Sejzī's *Fawā'id al-fo'ād*, in which Awlīā's table talk over about fifteen years is recorded, is perhaps the most important example of the *malfūẓāt* genre. Ḥamīd Qalandar, in his *Kayr al-majles*, attempted to do the same for Čerāg-e Dehlī but lacked his predecessor's talents as a mystic and as a poet.



Sīar al-Awlīā' by Amīr Kord, though not properly a *taḍkera*, is in the *taḍkera* tradition, containing biographical notices on the early Češtīs, especially Awlīā'. Although Amīr Kord wrote during the reign of Fīrūz Shah Toḡloq, he had access to much older oral and probably written material that is now lost. Moḥammad-Akbar Ḥosaynī, the son of Gīsū Derāz, also composed a *malfūzāt* of his father's conversations, *Jawāme' al-kālem*, which includes important material on earlier Češtī shaikhs. Other orders developed their own literary traditions, among which the *Maktūbat-e šadī* of the Ferdowsī shaikh Šaraf-al-Dīn b. Yaḥyā Manerī "Maḳdūm-al-Molk" (d. 782/1381) was particularly celebrated. Without such works and the spiritual dynamism of the Sufī orders that inspired them, it may be doubted that the Persian language and the Persian cultural ethos would have pervaded Hindustan so deeply during the sultanate period.

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