

CLASS-STRUCTURE AND SOCIAL STRATIFICATION IN EARLY MUSLIM INDIA (1206-1526 A.D.)

After the establishment of Muslim rule in India (1206), Muslim society was divided into two distinct groups; immigrants and local inhabitants. The number of local Muslims increased with the passage of time due to missionary activities of *Sufis* and sometimes due to personal interest of some sultans.¹ Immigrant Muslims were further divided into different groups including Persians, Turko-Mongols and Afghans. These groups mostly formed the ruling class. The other group of Muslims; local converts to Islam were simply the masses.² There were only few instances during early Muslim rule when the converts were given any prominent portfolio. In most of the cases they were the subjects not the masters. In this paper, our study would revolve round the structure of the social classes among Muslims in India. In this regard their professions, their taxes, their general habits and festivals, status and role of their women and slaves would also be brought under light.

The Muslim society in the period under review was divided into four different classes; the nobility, the Ulema and other religious groups, slaves and lastly, the Muslim masses. All these classes were further divided into many groups. Nobility included upper and lower ranks such as Khan, Malik, Amir etc. The next category was of military ranks of '*sipah salar and sar khel*'.³ The important groups of religious class included the theologians, the ulema, the ascetics, the sayyids, the pirs and their descendants. All these groups had their own specialties and distinctions. Domestic slaves included male and female slaves. Some male slaves were fixed for household works and the others for out door duties. Female slaves were kept either for domestic

works or for sexual pleasure. The status of later was higher than the first type of female slaves. ⁴Muslim masses were mostly Hindu converts to Islam. They consisted of different groups; small businessmen, artisans, smiths, peasants etc. ⁵Among all four classes of Muslims first two namely nobility and religious were the privileged classes of society and the later two namely slaves and masses were not much privileged if not totally unprivileged. The migrant Muslims were mostly settled in urban areas. There were separate *mohalas* (localities) for Muslims of different areas during Balban's period in Delhi such as Abbasi street, khawarzm shahi street, Alwi street etc. ⁶

Before discussing level of education of different classes, it is better to have an eye on the educational system of early medieval India. There was no centralized system of education. The general feature of the system was mostly the theological education. The curriculum consisted of Quran, Hadith, Tafseer, fiqh and other related subjects. Less emphasis was paid on Arabic literature, logic, mysticism and scholasticism. No status was given to local languages, literature, economics related subjects and sciences. The only exception is of Feroz Shah Tughluq who established large number of workshops to fulfill the requirements of royal house-hold. In such workshops slaves and others were given training to prepare different kinds of handicrafts. ⁷ Educational institutions mostly depended on individual's patronage. In case of negligence or death of the person or with the change of the dynasty madrasah or college had to loose its light. Method of teaching was traditional in which education revolved around the teacher. ⁸ Central and provincial courts were pivots of learning in the real sense. The most learned and the educated theologians and scholars were gathered there. The courts of Qutub-ud-din Aibak, Iltutmish, Nasir-ud-Din, Prince Muhammad, Ala-ud-Din Khilji, Ghiyas ud Din, Firoz Shah Thughlaq, Bahlol Lodhi etc were good examples in this regard. Many of these sultans opened large number of madrasahs and colleges. ⁹

Shahab-ud-din of Ghor was the first Muslim King who established some schools at Ajmer. Qutub-ud-Din made

arrangements of imparting basic religious education to Muslims inside the mosques. Iltutmish founded madrasah but it was destroyed later.¹⁰ Minhaj Siraj was appointed as Principal of Madrasah-i-Nasria during the regime of Sultana Razia. It seems that this madrasah might had been established by Iltutmish.¹¹ Prince Muhammad established literary societies. Firoz Shahi Madrassah of Feroz Shah Tughlaq was among the magnificent ones. Such examples show that some sultans really tried to popularize the education or to make it possible for common Muslim to get education; especially when scholarships were awarded to poor students.¹² It is mentioned that Feroz Shah, for the first time, tried to organize a regular system of public instruction. He sent scholars to far off areas to impart basic religious knowledge.¹³

The available sources are too meagre to get substantiate knowledge about common peoples' education. There is no method to count how many people had higher education. It is only an assumption that majority of the upper classes were educated, but only a little number of children from lower classes had education. However they might be inheriting the professions of their fathers as their teachers were their parents and other elders of the family.¹⁴ Elementary religious education of Quran and other basic religious teachings, which were available in most of the mosques, were easily accessible to them and they had been getting it. Otherwise most of the educational institutions were filled by the children of upper classes. As most of those institutions were in urban areas, therefore rural Muslims were mostly neglected.¹⁵

As Muslims in India were divided into different classes, so their professions varied. Immigrants were mostly taken into civil and military government jobs.¹⁶ In other words, they were civil or military bureaucrats. Governors of the provinces were also an important part of this class. They had large or small jagirs (*Iqta*) according to their cadres in lieu of their services to the state. It was only Ala ud din Khilji who tried to overcome the power and authority of the *iqta*-holders while confiscating the whole land but after his rule the same old system came into

practice again.¹⁷ *Iqta*-holders were free to collect revenue from their lands and a fixed amount was given to the central government. Normally, the *Iqtas* were not hereditary, but turned into hereditary during the regimes of weak Sultans.¹⁸

The members of religious class were originally immigrants. Many of the Ulema were government employees, related to provincial or central courts, or serving in *madrasahs*, colleges, courts and mosques. Majority of them were getting salaries from the government. They had respectable status in society and were among the privileged. Sayyads, another group of this class were mostly migrants like ulema and were liable to enjoy many privileges. This class was highly influential during Slave dynasty. Even Balban used to attend funeral processions of Sayyids, ulema, theologians and ascetics.¹⁹ Gradually moral degradation started among Ulemas and two groups emerged among them. The latter group turned towards *pir's* cult. It was kind of a profession where *pirs* were getting handsome amount of money from the simple, illiterate Muslims.²⁰

A group of slaves was no doubt serving mostly at homes. Various home-assignments were given to them. State-slaves, however, were given some important duties. The educated slaves were appointed in different civil departments. They were given commission in the army during some regimes like the Slaves and the Tughluqs. Sometimes, the slaves were given proper training of craftsmanship like Firuz Shah Tughluq appointed 12000 slaves to be trained in different crafts.²¹ Such skilled or educated slaves got respectable status in society with the passage of time.

Local Muslim masses adopted different professions. Most of them did not leave their inherited professions. Weaver's son was normally a weaver; goldsmith's son was normally a goldsmith and so on. The converted Muslims who were living in urban areas could not raise their standard of living to the higher degrees, although, their general status in society was same like immigrants, at least as a theory. Different industrial units such as textiles, carpets, bed-strings, dyeing, indigo, calico-painting,

metal work, stone and brick work, coral and ivory work, leather work, imitation jewellery etc., were in the urban areas, therefore Muslims of the specific areas were working in these industrial units. But medieval Indian historians have not mentioned their salaries or income.²² Some Muslims especially on coastal areas were related to trade or broker ship. Class of Muslim brokers was an organized one and earning profits. Foreign trade was mostly in the hands of foreign Muslims. Internal trade was shared by Muslims and Hindus both. Muslims of this class were well established but were insignificant politically.²³ Latter when *Iqta*-system was introduced and *Iqtadars* were bound to appoint armies, the local Muslims and in some cases Hindus must have been appointed in the armies.²⁴ Common Muslims of rural areas, too, could not leave their age old professions. They were either peasants or village artisans whose lives were very difficult and tough. The impact of local Hindus was far greater on them than the Islamic ideas.²⁵

Taxation system, more or less, was same during different dynasties with a sharp increase or decrease in land revenue. The two upper Muslim classes; nobility and Ulema, were exempted from paying any kind of tax. In place of paying tax, they were liable to enjoy all those facilities which were not available to common Muslims.²⁶ As the class of slaves was dependent, so it was also exempted from taxes. Muslim merchants like Hindu merchants had to pay some import and export duties. The large share of tax was actually paid by peasants out of whom majority were Hindus. The amount of land revenue was not fixed. It used to change with the change of dynasty or sometimes with the change of sovereign. Its ratio was 1/3, 1/4, 1/5, 1/10 and 1/20 during different regimes. It was only during the regime of Ala ud Din Khilji when it was 1/2 of the total land yield. Besides it, some other taxes like grazing tax and animal-keeping tax were imposed. According to Ferishta if a person had more than two pairs of oxen, a pair of buffaloes, two cows and ten goats, he had to pay the tax.²⁷

Habits and pastimes of Medieval Muslim society were developed according to the economic and financial conditions of

the different classes. Elite habits were normally different, as those were money-centered and time-consuming. Drinking was one of the common habits among the nobility. Wine was served openly in gatherings, even in Sultan's court. Only Ala ud Din was the Sultan who banned making, selling and drinking wine.²⁸ Serving of wine in gatherings was also banned. Prostitution was another evil habit prevailing among the elites. They could have physical relations either with slave girls or with public women. The institution of public women was, for the first time, regularized by Ala ud Din Khilji.²⁹ Music was adopted as a pastime by elites in later years. Sikander Lodhi was fond of music and arranging music parties on daily basis.³⁰ Hunting was common pastime of the nobility. Sometimes hunting was part of military training. Nobles were in practice of lavishly spending on dinners or drink parties. Due to their lavish spending, they were usually indebted under large sums of money which they used to take on interest from Hindu money-lenders. They were also in habit of spending money for the purpose of generosity. They on different occasions sent very costly gifts to their fellow nobles and the Sultan. Sultan was also in practice of honouring his relatives, nobles and some others with very costly gifts. Everyone who wanted to meet Muhammad bin Tughluq, for the first time or after a long time or on any specific occasion, had to present him costly gifts like horses, ornaments, weapons etc. In return Sultan gifted the person three times more than that he had given.³¹ Ibn-i-Batuta had mentioned that in case of sickness of any noble, Sultan used to send large amount of money to his specific noble. Mohammad Tughluq used to give very costly gifts to his guests and sometimes to Qazis and Ulemas.³²

The religious class normally remained far away from the pastimes of the nobility. It was only in later days when worldly Ulema adopted immoral attitudes of the nobility. Otherwise a number of them remained busy in preaching and other useful services. Their leisure time was normally spent in the company of common people. During early period, Ulemas and Sufis were always at the back of Sultan to guide him or sometimes to help him in participating in the holy wars.³³ Sufis were as influential among common people as among the upper classes. Wherever

they went common Muslims paid homage to them and received them with great respect.³⁴

Slaves spent their time as their masters wished to. Common Muslims of India or Muslim masses were so overburdened with their daily routine work and financial matters that they could spare very less time for other activities. Their pastimes were to have talks with their friends or to attend the marriage, *aqiqa* or other such ceremonies. Chess, chaupar, nard and cards were the most popular games among all classes as it did not require extra money. The other popular amusements of the lower classes were folk dances, singing or listening to songs, juggler's tricks, religious festivals and pilgrimages to holy shrines of Sufis.³⁵

Some common festivals were enjoyed by all classes. It included Lailat-ul-Qadr, Tarawih and Fasting, Id-ul-Fitr and Id-ul-Azha, the first ten days of the month of Muharram etc. All Muslims celebrated these occasions with religious zeal and fervor. Alms and charities were to be distributed and religious influence was observed. Muslims of different classes spent money and offered prayers according to their economic status and physical forbearance respectively.³⁶

The food and clothing is another important manner which needs discussion. Normal in-take of average man was three-time meals in a day. Diet of nobility and clergy included meat, butter, spices, pickles and sweet dishes. They used to spend lavishly on eating. Ibn-i-Batuta has mentioned that eatables were served in courses to the guests. The duty of serving was performed by slave-girls or in some cases by the boys. Muslims of upper classes always displayed magnificent hospitality. Drinking was common custom among nobility.³⁷ Food of common Muslims especially of Muslim peasantry and artisans was simple and limited. They took, normally, meal for two times in a day. Their routine eating choices included rice, pulses, vegetables, bread and meat occasionally. Their drink was fresh water and light sweet drink (*sharbat*) only on specific

occasions. In fact, common man did not have much to spend on eating. Drinking was not common among lower class Muslims.³⁸

Clothes, like food and other things were fixed for the different classes. Rich wore on what could not be afforded by lower class Muslims.³⁹ Clothing of nobility was very costly. The Sultan and his nobles wore *kulah* as head-dress. On public occasions, the nobility wore *kulah*, and a tunic of brocade and velvet with white belt. Their usual dressing was made up of silk or fine muslin according to the requirement of the weather.⁴⁰ The dressing of *Sufis* and *Ulema* was different from nobility's dressing. The *Sufis* wore an *aba* of coarse cloth, and the *taqiyah*, a four-cornered skull cap. The *Ulema* wore large turbans, a head-dress as well as an insignia of knowledge. Their body-dress was also of simple cloth not of silk as putting on silk by men is not permitted in Islam.⁴¹ The clothing of lower class Muslims was simple and usually consisted of two dresses for urban Muslims and very short dress or *Lungi* for rural Muslims. Local Muslims did not abandon the dressings of Hindus.⁴²

Housing of rich and poor Muslims was again different from each other. Urban Muslims especially of upper class spent large amount of money on building houses. Ibn-i-Batuta, a foreign traveller constructed a very lavish home. After constructing, he spent four thousand *dinars* only on repairing of his home.⁴³ The houses of the rich were constructed after the pattern of Sultan's palace. The buildings were spacious, consisted of big rooms, drawing rooms, baths, a spacious courtyard and even a library. Separate apartment for ladies and slaves were constructed. Household and furniture of such dwellings was very costly which included chairs, decoration pieces, costly utensils, carpets, mats, vessels and many other items. Beds were of light weight and covered with silk mats and pillows.⁴⁴ Lower class Muslims whether living in towns or villages, had very miserable and small accommodations. Their houses were built of mud with thatched roofs. There was no concept of furniture in their homes except some utensils and beds.⁴⁵

Muslim women of medieval India, either of Upper or lower class, mostly depended on men of their families. Sultan was in habit of having very large *harems* where women were provided with all available necessities and luxuries but were not generally permitted to interfere in political and administrative affairs.⁴⁶ Nobles also followed the practice of polygamy. Further, they had large number of slave girls. Women in their homes and lives had the same status as females of Sultan's *harem* had. It seems that women of lower class had comparatively more opportunities to raise voices on their domestic economic issues as a lot of them had to do work outside of their homes, especially in rural areas where women contributed in field's work. Wife of artisan used to help her husband while living inside home.⁴⁷ Generally, the birth of a male child was celebrated with eagerness which shows that women's status was ultimately less than men. No proper arrangements were made for the education of girls; even State seems to be indifferent to open female educational institutions. If the girls of lower classes were getting education, it was due to presence of some educated elderly ladies in or around their homes. So female education was purely in hands of private individuals which included a good number of Sufis as well who had fixed a day for women education in a week. Females of upper classes had comparatively more opportunities to get education as Razia Sultana got it under her father's guidance.⁴⁸

Finally, there were two contradictory opinions about status of women. One group considered females as degraded. This group was represented by Fakhr-i-Mudabir and Asami who extremely disliked those women who were involved in works or activities outside the four walls of their homes. The approach of this group was extreme about women. The other group was led by Baba Farid ud Din Gunj Shahr who respected the females a lot. He wanted that his daughter Bibi Sharifa should be appointed *khalifa* after him, but while having view on some female boundaries, he did not take this step. He stated:

“If some other women were there like Bibi Sharifa then females must have upper status than men”.⁴⁹

System of slavery was one of the distinguished features of early Turkish Empire especially. Independent Muslim government was established by a freed slave Qutub ud Din Aibak. Slaves were actually bought by Mohammad Ghauri who provided the best available education and training to selected slaves who later on conquered and took the rule of India in their hands. Once a courtier of Mohammad Ghauri pointed out:

“to a Sultan like you sons are necessary to succeed to your vast empire.”⁵⁰

Sultan replied that he had too many sons in shape of slaves. So the status of slaves in early years was very high in the Indian society. Gradually, that status was affected, but still a slave was not helpless victim in the hands of his master. If he was a state slave, he was trained as artisan or was assigned with other duties in the court and above all, he could be given power and high position in the army as Firuz Shah Tughluq did.⁵¹ Monarchs were also concerned about their slaves and provided them with acceptable or comfortable if not luxurious life. Sometimes he had better opportunities of grooming than freed low-class Muslims due to favours of his master.⁵² Some negative aspects were also related with the system of slavery. They were not independent citizens, so they could not move their living place, could not adopt profession of their choice, could not marry and develop family relations without the approval of their masters. This was not a healthy trend and a progressive society could not emerge under such circumstances.

The status of female slaves was far less than males. They were either committed to do domestic work or were used for sexual pleasure by Sultan and his nobility. As she could not get job in the military or could not learn artisanship, so the opportunities of her free movement were far less than male slaves. Her life was mostly depended on the will of her master. Amir Khusrau had discussed about slave girls in detail.

According to him Turkish slave girls were beautiful and delicate so deserve to be bought. On the other side, Indian slave girls were black and white mixed, but not so delicate. He has discussed about the nature of slave-girls also.⁵³ Slaves, on the whole, were important part of Muslim society as were performing many duties.

This whole discussion shows that majority of the Muslims were living in urban areas as they found it more comfortable and easy to be settled there. Facilities of life were easy to access in the cities. But with the passage of time, many locals were converted to Islam due to preaching of Sufis and generous attitude of the rulers. Owing to it, Islam found its way in the rural areas as well. Rural Muslims were indigenous people, so they were highly influenced by their former culture and traditions. They took extra time to follow Islam truly.⁵⁴

One of the major drawbacks of the Muslim society of the time was that it was divided into classes; the rulers and the ruled ones; the detail of the classes has already been discussed. There was sharp distinction in the living styles, dresses, food-habits, housing, and level of education, means of progress, access to the Sultan and in many other ways. The difference of economic conditions of both the classes never let them to create understanding with each other. The rulers were the masters and the local Muslims like other people were only the masses. Only one group out of upper class; the Ulema and the Sufis created reasonable relationship with the common people and it was due to their efforts that a good number of locals embraced Islam. As the rulers were mostly immigrants, so they did not provide opportunities of grooming to the local Muslims. There were only few instances when local Muslims were given a small proportion in the government affairs.

It did not mean that converted Muslims were unhappy to accept Islam as their religion; they were still in better position than earlier times. Majority of the converts belonged to the lower caste of Hindus, who were looked down upon a lot in the Hindu society. Now after accepting Islam, theoretically they had equal

rights like upper-class Muslims. They were treated equally under law; the punishments and rewards were same for all the classes. They enjoyed free access to go to mosques and enjoyed all other socio-religious rights which Islam has established. So socially their condition was improved a lot but economically they had to struggle and wait for a long period to move to the middle and the upper class.

Notes And References

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