
UNIT 17 FORMATION OF THE SULTANATE RULING CLASS

Structure

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17.0 OBJECTIVES

In Unit 16, we have discussed the administrative structure of the Delhi Sultanate. In this Unit we will analyse the nature of the Sultanate ruling class taking into consideration the following :

- its role as an appropriator of surplus,
- the composition of the ruling class,
- changes in the ruling class, and
- the interests that bound it together.

17.1 INTRODUCTION

The most important problem of the Sultanate in its early stages, and even later, was to consolidate the conquered territories. To this end, the ruling class served as an important pivot who shared the resources of the country. The Turks brought with them the institution of the *iqtas* (see Sec. 16.6), which helped in the centralization of authority to a great extent. As greater centralization was sought to be effected, changes could be seen in the institution of the '*iqta*' as well as in the composition of the ruling class.

17.2 THE RULING CLASS AT THE TIME OF THE GHORIAN INVASION

At the time of the Ghorian invasions, north India was divided into a number of principalities ruled by *rais* and *ranas* (local chiefs). At the village level, *khots* and *muqaddams* (village headman) stood on the borderline of the rural aristocracy. In between, the *chaudhuri* can be spotted as the head of hundred villages.

At any rate, we can accept a broad definition of the position of the pre-Ghorian ruling class as one which appropriated the surplus produce of the peasants, by exercising superior rights over land. In analyzing the formation of the ruling class in the Sultanate, some pertinent questions arise : How did the new ruling class supplant this older ruling class? What measures did it adopt for appropriating the surplus revenue? How was it different from the class that it supplanted?

Throughout the thirteenth century, the Turkish armies furthered the political and military control over North India. By the mid-fourteenth century, it spread to the Deccan. A large alien territory had to be pacified and governed and the ruling class had to be maintained and sustained. The early Turkish ruling class was very much in the nature of a co-sharer of political and financial powers with the Sultans. In the beginning, the nobles (*amiran*) were practically independent in distant areas of the conquered territories where they were sent by the Centre as governors. The latter were designated *muqti* or *wali* and their territories were known as *iqtas*. Gradually, the practice began of transferring *muqtis* from one *iqta* to another (a detailed discussion on *iqta* system is given in Unit 16). The pre-Ghorian political structure seems to have continued, with tribute being realised from the *rais* and *ranas*, who were expected to collect taxes as they had done before.

From our contemporary historians, like Minhaj Siraj and Barani, we learn that the most important nobles, and even the Sultans, in the early stages of the foundation of the Sultanate, were from the families of the Turkish slave-officers. Many of the early Turkish nobles and Sultans (such as Aibak and Iltutmish) had started their early career as slaves but they received letters of manumission (*khat-i azadi*) before becoming Sultans. One such was Qutbuddin Aibak. On his death in A.D. 1210, Iltutmish, one of his favoured slaves, seized Delhi and set himself up as Sultan. He created his own corps of Turkish slaves—the Shamsi *maliks*, called by Barani *turkan-i chihilgani* ("The Forty"). Iltutmish's nobility also included a number of *Tajik* or free-born officers. That this element of free-born immigrants continued to form a part of the ruling class is noted by Minhaj at the time of Nasiruddin Mahmud's accession (1246 A.D.). The problem of succession after the death of Iltutmish brought into light the division within the nobles.

In spite of the internal quarrels within the ruling class, there was a basic solidarity which manifested itself in its hostility to outsiders. For example, Raziya's (1236-1240 A.D.) elevation of an Abyssinian, Jamaluddin Yaqut, to the post of *amir-i akhur* ("master of the royal horses") caused great resentment. Similar was the case of Raihan, a Hindu covert to Islam. Thus, the nobility was seen as the preserver of the certain groups, sometimes under the principle of 'high birth', as reflected in the policies ascribed to Balban by Barani.

Now you can understand how an identity of interests bound the dominant groups. Race and perhaps religion, too, played important role in the formation of ruling groups. Actually, the ruling class was not a monolithic organization. There were numerous factions and cliques, each trying to guard their exclusive positions jealously. The Turkish military leaders who accompanied and participated in the Ghorian invasion formed the core of the early Turkish ruling class: they acquired most of the key-posts at the centre and provinces.

17.3.1 The Ilbarites

Qutbuddin Aibak who succeeded to the Indian territories of Muhammad Ghori, had no greater right than the other nobles like Yalduz and Qubacha who asserted their independence and autonomy at Ghazna and Sind respectively. This was to be a feature of the early history of the Sultanate. The Sultans needed the support of the nobility to establish and maintain themselves in power. For instance, Iltutmish came to the throne with the support of the nobles of Delhi. The Turkish nobles played an important part in elevating Sultans to the throne and supporting contenders to the throne. According to Barani, the older Turkish nobility used to tell each other : "What are thou that I am not, and what will thou be, that I shall not be."

The early Turkish nobility sought to emphasize their exclusiveness and their monopoly to rule. Efforts by other social groups to challenge their monopoly were resented and resisted. The nobles of Iltutmish called *turkan-i-chihilgani* ("The Forty") wielded considerable power after his death. They were an important group, and efforts by the Sultans to incorporate other groups were met with much resistance. As already mentioned, Raziya Sultan had to face stiff opposition from the

Turkish *amirs*, when she elevated an Abyssinian, Jamaluddin Yaqut, to the office of *amir-i akhur*. Efforts of Nasiruddin Mahmud (1246-1266 A.D.) to break the vested power of this group by dismissing Balban (who was one of the 'Forty') from the court and replacing him by an Indian convert, Imaduddin Raihan, did not meet with much success. Minhaj voiced the anger of the "Turks of pure lineage" who "could not tolerate Imaduddin Raihan of the tribes of Hind to rule over them." The opposition of the Turkish ruling class forced the Sultan to remove Raihan and reinstate Balban.

On his accession to the throne, Balban (1266-1286 A.D.) took measures to break the power of the *turkan-i chihilgani* by various measures. He himself was the creation of a group of nobles loyal to him. Barani states that Balban had several of the older Turkish nobles killed. This was an effort to intimidate the nobility, who could and did pose, a challenge to the Crown. Balban himself, according to Barani, kept Sultan Nasiruddin as a "puppet" (*namuna*); therefore, he was vary of the leading old nobles.

17.3.2 The Khaljis

In A.D. 1290, the Ilbari dynasty was overthrown by the Khaljis. The coming to power of the Khaljis is seen as something new by contemporary historians. Barani mentions that the Khaljis were a different "race" from the Turks. Modern scholars like C.E. Bosworth speak of them as Turks, but in the thirteenth century no one considered them as Turks, and thus it seems that the accession to power was regarded as something novel because earlier they did not form a significant part of the ruling class. Alauddin Khalji further eroded the power of the older Turkish nobility by bringing in new groups such as the Mongols (the 'New Muslims'), Indians and Abyssinians (for the latter, the example of Malik Kafur is well-known). This trend towards a broadening of the composition of the ruling class continued during the rule of the Tughluqs.

It may be incidentally mentioned here that there was a very small group called *kotwalian* (pl. of *kotwal*) at Delhi during the reign of Balban and Alauddin Khalji. Infact, this was a family group, headed by Fakhruddin who was the *kotwal* of Delhi. This group appears to have played some political role during and after Balban's death.

17.3.3 The Tughluqs

Under Muhammad Tughluq, apart from the Indians and the Afghans, the ruling class became unprecedently more heterogenous with the entry of larger numbers of foreign elements, especially the *Khurasani*, whom the Sultan called *aizza* (dear ones). Many of them were appointed as *amir sadah* ("commander of hundred"). Concerning the non-Muslim as well as the converted Indians, Barani laments that the Sultan raised the "low-born" (*jawahir-i lutrah*) to high status. He mentions musicians, barbers, cooks, etc. who got high positions. He gives the example of Peera Mali (gardener) who was given the *diwan-i wizarat*. Converts like Aziz-ud Din *khammar* (distiller) and Qawamul Mulk Maqbul, Afghans like Malik Makh and Malik Shahu Lodi Afghan, Hindus like Sai Raj Dhara and Bhiran Rai were given *iqta* and positions.

The reign of Feroz Tughluq does not give us any clear pattern about the social origins of the nobles. The situation was fluid with a false veneer of peace between the Sultan and the *amirs*. Certain designations were used with reference to the nobles — *khan*, *malik* and *amir*. *Khan* was often used with reference to Afghan nobles, *amir* came to mean a commander, *malik*—a chief, ruler, or king. Along with their titles of honour, the nobles were given some symbols of dignity designated as *maratib* which signified privileges—*khilat* (robe of honour), sword and dagger presented by the Sultan, horses and elephants that they were entitled to use in their processions, canopy of State and the grant of parasol (*chhatri*) and insignia and kettle-drums.

It is significant to note that every Sultan sought to form and organize a group of nobles which would be personally loyal to him. This obviated the necessity of depending upon previous groups whose loyalty was suspect. That's why we find the contemporary historians employing terms like Qutbi (ref. Qutbuddin Aibak), Shamsi

(ref. Shamsuddin Iltutmish), Balbani and Alai *amirs*. But one thing was quite certain: every group tried to capture the attention of the Sultan—whether weak or strong—because all privileges and power issued forth from the sovereign. This, in turn, went to a great extent in strengthening gradually the position of the Sultan himself if he was a man of strong will.

The Afghans were frequently recruited into the feudal bureaucracy of the Delhi Sultanate. With the coming of the Lodis (1451-1526), the Afghan predominance got enlarged.

Check Your Progress 1

1) Examine the composition of the ruling class under the Ilbarites.

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2) What changes were brought about in the composition of the nobility under the Khaljis and the Tughluqs? Write in about five lines.

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3) Mark right (✓) or wrong (×) against the following statements :

- a) In the thirteenth century the Turkish nobles were paid in cash.
- b) Muhammad Tughluq incorporated different social groups into his nobility.
- c) Barani regards the Khaljis as Turks.

17.4 IQTA AND THE DISPERSAL OF RESOURCES AMONG THE RULING CLASS

We have studied the institution of *iqta*, its early history in the Islamic world, and its application in India in Unit 16. The income of the Sultanate was primarily and largely derived from the land revenue. *Khalisa* was the term for the land whose revenue was exclusively meant for the Sultan himself, while the revenue from the land, called *iqta*, was assigned by the state to the nobles. The *muqtis* or *iqta*-holders were required to furnish military assistance to the Sultan in times of need, apart from maintaining law and order in and collecting the revenue from their *iqta*.

These revenue assignments were generally non-hereditary and transferable. In fact, it was through the institution of *iqta* that the Sultan was able to control the nobles. The *muqti* collected land revenue from the peasants of his territory and defrayed therefrom his own salary as well as that of his soldiers. The demand to send the excess amounts (*jawazil*) to the *diwan-i wizarat* was symbolic of the trend towards centralization. The *muqti* had to submit accounts of their realisation and expenditure to the treasury. Auditing was severe to prevent fraud.

Alauddin Khalji also took other measures for controlling his nobility. Regular reports from the *barids* (intelligence officers) kept him posted with the actions of the nobles. A check was kept on their socialising, and marriages between them could not take place without the permission of the Sultan. These measures have to be seen against the background of recurrent incidents of rebellions in which the *muqtis* utilized and appropriated the resources of their areas, to rebel or to make a bid for the throne. This explains the principle of transfer also. Under Muhammad Tughluq (1325-1351 A.D.), the nobles were given *iqta* in lieu of cash salary but their troops were paid in cash by the treasury in contrast to the earlier period. These new fiscal arrangements and the greater control over assignments possibly contributed to the conflict between the Sultan and the nobles since they were deprived of the gains of the *iqta* management. However, during the reign of Feroz Tughluq there was a general retreat from the practice of increased central authority over *iqta*. In practice, Feroz started granting *iqta* to the sons and heirs of *iqta*-holders. The long reign of Feroz Tughluq comparatively witnessed few rebellions but it also saw the beginning of the disintegration and decentralisation. By the time of the Lodis (1451-1526 A.D.), the *iqtadars* (now called *wajhdars*) do not seem to have been subject to constant transfers.

17.5 ULEMA

The *ulema*, the theological class, had an important position in the Sultanate. It was from them that important legal and judicial appointments were made—the *sadr-us sudur*, *shaikh-ul Islam*, *qazi*, *mufti*, *muhtasib*, *imam* and *khatib*. The *ulema* can be seen as an adjunct of the ruling class, maintained by revenue grants from the Sultan, and often by members of the ruling class. The ideological significance of the *ulema* was great as they provided legitimacy to the ruling class. They exercised an influence which was not only religious but sometimes political, too.

Check Your Progress 2

1) Write two main characteristic features of the *iqta* system.

- a)
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- b)
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2) What measures were undertaken by Alauddin Khalji to control his nobility?

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3) Mark right (✓) or wrong (✗) against the following statements :

- a) i) *Iqtas* were hereditary assignments.
 ii) *Iqtas* were the personal property of the nobles.
 iii) Generally *iqtas* were transferable revenue assignments.

- b) i) *Muqtis* were personal body-guards of the Sultan.
ii) *Muqtis* were religious teachers.
iii) *Muqtis* were governors to whom the revenue from the *iqtas* were assigned.
- c) *Fawazil* was :
i) Extra payment met to the nobles.
ii) Excess amount paid to the exchequer by the *iqtedars*.
iii) Revenue assigned in lieu of salary.

17.6 LET US SUM UP

With the establishment of the Sultanate a new ruling class emerged which was entirely different in its nature and composition to its predecessors. In the beginning, primarily, it maintained its alien (Turkish) character, but, later, as the process of amalgamation deepened, the Sultans started recruiting nobles from other social groups as well. Thus, the nature and the character of the nobility widened greatly and not only the Turks, but Indian Muslims, non-Muslims and even foreigners (Abyssinians, etc.) were incorporated into its fold. The *ulema* can also be seen as an adjunct of the ruling class who were primarily maintained by revenue-free land grants or *wazifa* (cash).

17.7 KEY WORDS

- Ami-i akhur** : Master of royal stable/horses
Amir-i sadah : "Centurians", "Commander of hundred"
Khat-i azadi : Letter of manumission
Tajik : a race/"free-born nobles"
Turkan-i chihilgani : "The Forty" (corporate body of Turkish nobles of Iluttmish)
Ulema : Theologians
Wajhdar : Salaried persons/*iqta*-holders

17.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) See Sub-sec. 17.3.1
2) See Sub-sec. 17.3.2, 17.3.3
3) a) × b) ✓ c) ×

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) See Sec. 17.4
2) See Sec. 17.4
3) a) (i) × (ii) × (iii) ✓
b) (i) × (ii) ✓ (iii) ×
c) (i) × (ii) ✓ (iii) ×