

**“A CRITICAL STUDY OF THE POSITION AND INFLUENCE OF THE  
ULEMA DURING THE MAMLUQ PERIOD (1206-1290 A.D.)**

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**ABSTRACT**

*In this research paper a humble attempt has been made to see the status and contribution of the ulema during the Mamluq period (1206-1290 A.D.). To know the status and the contribution of ulema, we have available sufficient amount of contemporary Persian sources like Hasan Nizami's- 'Taj-ul- Maassir', Minhaj Siraj's - 'Tabaqat -i-Nasiri', Ziauddin Barani's 'Tarikh-i-farojshahi' and 'Fatwa-i-Jahandari etc. On the basis of these sources, we can state that the ulema constituted a very influential section of muslim society during the period under review. They were held in high esteem on account of their religious knowledge.*

*The ulema usually performed many functions. They were Jurists, scholars, teacher's, reciters of the Quran and functioners of the Mosques and so on. Besides this, during the period under review the ulema also contributed in the intellectual and literary field.*

*What role did play in contemporary politics? In this context, we get the information that Sultans of Delhi appointed ulema as a religious advisor because of their proficiency in Islamic knowledge. But in general, during the period under review the political influence of the ulema increased more during the weak and conservative Mamluq Sultans, but under the powerful Sultans, they remained within proper limits.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Fatawa, Alim, Theology, Mamluq, Ulema-I- Akhlat, Ulema-I-Duniya. Persian, Siddiqi, Persian, Turkan-I- Chahalgani. Muftis, Iskifta, Shariat.*

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**INTRODUCTION**

The establishment of the Sultanate of Delhi in the beginning of the 13th century was a efficacious point in the history of India. With the establishment of this independent muslim Sultanate in northern India, many new changes were introduced not only in the political-administrative field - but also in the sphere of Socio- religions and economic life. Gradually the effect of these changes in the related field become visible.

The Period from 1206 A.D. to 1290 A.D. has a noticeable importance as far as political and religious development is concerned. The first important Dynasty in the Delhi sultanate was that of the Mamluqs. The sultans who ruled from 1206 A.D. to 1290 A.D. they have been classified by Persian historians into classes like Qutbi, muizzi and shamsis etc. But Modern historians classified them by the name of slave's dynasty, Early Turks, Ilbari, Mamluqs and Pathan etc.<sup>1</sup> But they certainly cannot be called Pathans. It is also not appropriate to call them slaves as some of

them were freed from slavery. In this context historian Habibullah<sup>2</sup> is of the opinion that it is more appropriate to call them 'Mamluqs'. He proposed this name by giving example from the history of medieval Egypt. There the dynasty established by independent slaves conquerors was named Mamluq dynasty. Now, most of the modern historians accepted this view point.

During the period under review the ulema appear as an important and influential section of the muslim society and they were held in high esteem on account of their religious knowledge.<sup>3</sup> The circumstances in which muslim society was developed, it was natural for ulema's to occupy important position. At that time the Common muslim were not aware of the problems of the religion. And because of ulema's certified knowledge about religion, they became the religious advisor of the muslims. On the basis of their proficiency in Islamic knowledge, they used to decide whether or not the actions of muslims were based on principles of Islam.

Etymologically, ulema is the plural of Alim (learned). The primary meaning of the term is one who possesses theilm i.e. knowledge.<sup>4</sup> The word's technical significance is a scholar of Islamic learning, theology and canon law.<sup>5</sup> And in many traditions of the prophet- they are referred to as his heirs".<sup>6</sup> The attitude of medieval muslim society towards them is very neatly expressed by a near contemporary historian in the following words- "All people known that after the apostles and prophets rank the truthful persons (siddiqin), Martyrs (Shahidan) and Scholars (Aliman). The scholars are included in the category of siddiqins and have preference the Martyrs. The prophet has Said- 'The ulema are the heirs of the prophets'.<sup>6</sup>..... The laws of shariat are enforced by them and things illegal and not sanctioned by the Shariat are suppressed by them. The prophet further said that a single faqir is greater terror for devil than a thousand pious men..... The Best Kings and the best nobles are those who visit the doors of the ulema and the worst ulema are those who visit the doors of the kings and nobles. And the ulema are much superior in dignity and status to others.<sup>7</sup>

During the period under review, the ulema were divided into two categories- ulema - i - Akhirat i.e. those solely devoted to spirituality, devotion and worship of Allah and ulema-i-Duniya i.e. the worldly scholars.<sup>8</sup> Especially this type of ulema utilized their knowledge of religion for worldly gain.

The ulema usually performed many functions. They were Jurists, scholars, religious teachers, readers of the Qoran, reciters of traditions and functioners of the Mosques and so on. Their essential duty was to preserve the knowledge of the 'Divine' will, and to sustain the society, as society and give it religious and moral guidance. It is important to note that the ulema carried on the teaching of Islam, enforced its morals, upheld its laws, proclaimed its doctrines, suppressed corrupt practices and vice, in simple terms promoted good and condemned evil in the society. So, the ulema were very respected.

In addition to government service there were some Muslim scholars (Alims) and Saints in large numbers who lead their life with the help of wazifas. But we know very little about the social base of this large and unorganized group of people. Generally, they were similar to the middle class though some ulema had reached up to the post of Qazi's and become the part of the ruling class.<sup>9</sup> Most of the Alims (Scholars), Poets, historians and government employees come under this social class. And we can call these classes - intelligentsia class or educated class. As we know the country in which most of the people are uneducated the educated people or those people can speak about religion are very respected. This was the case in this time also.<sup>10</sup>

We also get the information that the ulema also controlled the business as well as the cultic aspects of community's institutions. They were the managers, Scribes and accountants for the administration of Mosques, Schools, Philanthropies and their properties in trust. Here, arises an important question - What were the expectations of common people from ulema. In this context we get this information. that the people expected a very high standard of morality from the ulema. People believed, "When an illiterate man dies his sins also die with him, but when an Alim dies his sins outlive him."<sup>11</sup> Besides this, people also expected the ulemato be chaste, truthful, afraid of moral turpitude, scrupulously observing the shariat and Sunnah and free from worldly gain."<sup>12</sup>

It is important to indicate here that in medieval period, the worldly ulema were not respected Shaikh like Shaikh Sharfuddin and Shaikh Ahmed<sup>13</sup> repeatedly warned muslims to protect themselves from the evil influence of the worldly ulema. Sultan Balban's son Bugra Khan also suggested his son Kaiqubad to be cautious about worldly ulema.

The contribution of the ulema in this period is also visible in the compilation of Fatawa literature. According to historian Zafar-ul-Islam, medieval Fatawa literature has its own historical significance. It contains information about many legal decisions.<sup>14</sup> Fatawa signifies legal opinions and verdicts of Jurists or Muftis on any point of law. And the act of seeking a legal opinion as well as the query itself is called Istifta.<sup>15</sup> Some of the important Fatawa of medieval period were "Al-Fatawa-al-Ghiyasiah" Fatawa-i-Firuzshahi, Al-Fatawa-al-Tatarkhani etc.<sup>16</sup> We also get the information that most of the fatawa literature was written in Arabic language and by the directions of sultans and noble class.

Another important question that needs to be discussed is what role the ulema played in contemporary politics.

In this context, we get the information that Sultans of the Delhi appointed ulema as religious advisors because of their proficiency in Islamic knowledge. However, we find that the first two decades of the establishment of Turkish rule in Northern India, there is less influence of the ulema in the politics of the sultanate. Nor do we get any such information in the contemporary Persian sources. The Persian Historian Hasan Nizami<sup>17</sup> repeatedly mentions Mamluq Sultan Qutubuddin Aibak's respect for the ulema, but nowhere does he mention any instance when the ulema intervened in political affairs. But when Iltutmish ascended the throne (1210-1236 A.D.), it can be said that ulema had become fully conscious of their position.

Mamluq Sultan Iltutmish had great respect for the ulema.<sup>18</sup> At the reign of Iltutmish, a group of ulema was led by Qazi Wajihuddin who enquired the sultan about manumitted. But the sultan handled the ulema very tactfully and created such a condition that they became his actual supporters. Some contemporary and near contemporary Persian sources inform us that when Delhi became the abode of a large number of ulema from west & central Asia, they (ulema) noticed that the Dhimmis (Hindu) were being tolerated by the Sultan.<sup>19</sup> And then, some of them led a delegation to Sultan Iltutmish and urged him to bring about forcible conversions through measures which were both unwarranted and impracticable. The Sultan Iltutmish referred them to the Wazir Nizam-ul-mulk Junaidi, who dismissed them with a diplomatic answer.<sup>20</sup> This clearly indicates that the state was not guided by the advice of the ulema.

After the death of Sultan Iltutmish (1236 A.D.) Rukun-din Firuz ascended the throne. But he was an incompetent sultan. During his time, his mother Shah Turkan<sup>21</sup> had a lot of influence on

administration. Shah Turkan was famous for donating gifts to the Alims and sayyads. But due to his despotism, insurgency started against him and after his fall, Raiza become the sultan. Though Razia's time period (1236-1240 A.D.) as a sultan was limited, yet she was the most capable of Iltutmish's successors. Praising Razia contemporary Persian Historian Minhaj- siraj has written that- "Sultan Raiza was a great ruler-wise, Justice loving, generous and well-wisher of the people".<sup>22</sup> Although she had all the royal qualities, but she was a woman, perhaps that is why all her qualities were useless in the eyes of men. We also get the information from Persian sources that most of ulema were unhappy due to her entry in the court without Hijab. And they hatched conspiracies against Raiza along with some Nobles. It is important to mention here that some modern historians do not agree with this point of view. According to them, the main reason for the downfall of Razia was the ambition of the Turkish nobles i.e. "Turkan-i-Chahalgani".

After Raiza's decline the successors were not-capable to enhance the status of kingship. The last of the Iltutmish's successor Nasiruddin<sup>23</sup> was more a calm personality than a real ruler. During this period, the Sultan was only an emblem of political sovereignty. Political power passed out of his hand into the ministerial body which began to wield political power in the name of Kingship. During this period, the ulema also tried to increase their political influence. In this context Persian historian Ziya Barni writes that at the time of Balban accession (1266 A.D.) the Sultan's power had practically dissolved. In his 'Tarikh-i-Ferojshahi'—Barni gives a cogent account of Balban's effort to resurrect that power.<sup>24</sup> In this connection Barni writes that - "Sultan Balban with all his sense of affection and Benevolence, justice and equality and fast and prayers was cruel and terrible in awarding punishment."

Actually Balban wanted to establish a state which was based on triple relationship between God, King and the people. It is important to mention that as a muslim Balban had his own ideals, but as a political and statesman his stand point in kingship was totally different. In matters of political exigency, Balban stuck to policy of "Iron and Blood", even religion could not control and tanned down his unchecked instinct for political power. According to Modern Historian Iswari Toppa – "Politics then become his guiding spirit".<sup>25</sup> We also get the information that although the ulema were not happy with the governance policies of sultan Balban, yet they could not oppose him either. It mattered nothing to Balban whether or not his political moves or acts were to be justified religiously. Thus, during this period the influence of not only the nobility but also of the ulema was very limited.

After the death of Balban, his grandson Muizuddin Kaiqubad (1287-1290AD) ascended the throne. During his reign, the influence of the ulema on state policies had increased again. However, the influence of ulema declined again when the Khalji's (1290-1320 A.D.) come to power especially during the reign of Sultan Alaudin Khalji.<sup>26</sup>

To sum up, we can conclude that during the Mamluq period (1206-1290 A.D.), the ulema constituted an influential section of muslim society and they were respected on account of their religious knowledge. During the period under review, the ulema played multiple roles. They were jurists, religious teachers, reciters of the Quran and functionaries of the Mosques and functionaries of the Mosques and so on. And the Intellectual contribution of ulema is also visible in the compilation of Fatawa literature. Last but not least, in politics also, they tried to play an important role. But in general the political influence of the ulema increased more during the weak and conservative Muslim Sultans. And under the powerful sultan like Iltutmish and Balban, they remained within proper limits.

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