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## **Viewpoints**

# **The Intellectual and Cultural Impact of Islam on India During the Delhi Sultanate (1206-1526)**

**Arshad Islam**

### **Introduction**

Before venturing into the historical analysis of multi-religious collaboration and civilization building in India under the Muslims, it is important to understand the vision of “Islam” itself, which pertains to the eponymous notion of peaceful submission, and this was always a social as well as personal ideal, which Islamic conquests ultimately brought to large swaths of the Mediterranean world and Asia. Early Muslim expeditions reached Sindh c. 636, but it was not a substantive frontier with India until the time of Muawiyah (r. 661-680) (al-Baladhuri, 1964; al-Kufi, 1983). Sindh’s organized occupation arrived in 712 under the Umayyad caliph Walid b. ‘Abd al-Malik (r.705-715). Al-Hajjaj b. Yusuf al-Thaqafi (d.714), the Umayyad viceroy, endorsed the authority of the army in Sindh to Muhammad b. Qasim al-Thaqafi, who subjugated the region by the end of 712, whereupon Sindh became an Umayyad province (Al-Tabari, 1964; al-Kufi, 1983).

The Arab-Islamic territorial expansion has traditionally been seen as the story of the spread of Islam by both Muslims and historians in general, but a more sophisticated understanding of the role of non-political cultural encounters has emerged in more recent years. Islam arrived in India long before the dawn of Muslim political power, and

even in its pre-political stage it made a significant impact on the lives of local people, with the traders of the Arabian maritime civilization becoming well-known for their fairness and righteousness among the ports of India and beyond, long before the region of Sindh became a gateway to Islam in north-west India. Throughout the Subcontinent the socio-cultural history of the region has always been characterized by an incredibly multicultural society, divided into various groups belonging to diverse castes and creeds (Chand, 2011; Qureshi, 1998; Roy, 1937).

The growth of conventional Sufism and the development of the Sufi orders corresponded with the formation of the Delhi Sultanate. Among the Sufi orders that prospered during that period, the Chishti and Suhrawardi orders were more prominent on Indian soil. Both orders established their organizations parallel with the formation of the Delhi Sultanate. Within a short period, Sufis belonging to these orders flourished in forming their control in the whole country and built up their centres in several Indian cities by establishing *jama'at khanah* and *khanqah* (Sufi lodges/ hospices) (Nizami, 2002).

### *The Chishti Silsilah*

Established by Khwaja Abu Ishaq Shami (d. 940) in Chisht, a small village near Herat, Afghanistan, the Chishti Silsilah was introduced from Central Asia to India by Khwaja Mu'in al-Din Sijzi (d. 1236), who belonged from Sijistan. After living some time in Lahore, he came to Delhi and after a brief stop there went to Ajmer. Shaykh Hamid al-Din Suali (d. 1273), one of the most famous adherents of Khwaja Moin al-Din Sijzi, recalled that the latter landed in Delhi during the reign of Iltutmish after the seizure of Ajmer. Under the leadership of his energetic successors, Qutb al-Din Bakhtiyar Kaki (d.1235), Farid Ganj-i-Shakar (d. 1266), Nizam al-Din Auliya (d. 1325), and Nasir al-Din Chiragh-i-Dilli (d.1356), the Chishti Silsilah became very well-known and vital centres appeared at Ajmer, Narnaul, Suwal, Nagaur, Mandal, Hansi, and Ajodhan, and many towns in Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Bengal, Assam, and the Deccan (Nizami, 2002; Chand, 2011).

### *The Suhrawardi Silsilah*

Najib al-Din Abdul Qahir Suhrawardi (d.1168), a dweller of Suhraward, was the architect of this Silsilah, but Shihab al-Din Suhrawardi (d.1234), his nephew, strengthened it. Several of its followers migrated to India because of the Guzz and Mongol invasions, notably Hamid al-Din Nagori, Najib al-Din Buzghush, Zahar al-Din Mahmud, Muhammad Yamini, and Shaykh Baha al-Din Zakariya Multani (d.1262), who developed a strong base for the Silsilah in Multan and Sindh. Their leading centres continued in Uchh and Multan. Under the Tughluqs, Saiyid Jalal al-Din Bukhari (d. 1291) became a celebrity and his khanqah at Uchh became a major spiritual rendezvous, while Shaykh Shihab al-Din's *Awarif al-Ma'rif* remains an adored monument of Sufi literature, popular in all Sufi circles across the Muslim world (Dehlavi, 1891; Ibn Batuta, 1953; Nizami, 2002; Islam, 2001).

### **Works Produced by Muslim Intellectuals**

Rukn al-Din Samarqandi (d.1218), from the eponymous Samarqand in Central Asia, was chosen as Qazi of Lakhnauti by Muhammad Bakhtiyar Khalji (d. 1206). He studied Sanskrit in Bengal with a native yogi, and subsequently rendered *Amritkund*, a Sanskrit treatise on yoga, to Persian as *Hauz al-Hayat* (The Pool of Life), facilitated by Bhoj, a resident Brahman. In addition, he translated this tome into Arabic as *Mirat al-Ma'ani fi Idraki-Alam-i-Insani* (Mirror of the Meanings of Perceptions of Human Reality). This was an innovative endeavour exploring the mystery and divine knowledge and philosophies of India to the outside world. Muhammad Ghaus Shattari Gwaliori (d. 1562) later translated the Arabic translation into a new Persian version, *Bahr al-Hayat* (The Ocean of Life) (Rashid, 1969; Hadi, 1995).

Malik Taj al-Din Reza, born in India, was an admirable Persian poet and a *dabir* (Secretary) of Iltutmish. Due to his superb poetry, he got admiration from the literati of Delhi. Taj Reza recited an admirable *qasida* marking the event of acquiring the robe of honour for Iltutmish sent by the Abbasid Caliph Al-Mustansir (r.1226-1242) (Qawwas, 1999; Hadi, 1995). Reza composed verses on Iltutmish's annexation of the Gwalior Fort, and these odes were later engraved on the Fort's gate. In addition, he comprised odes for Rukn al-Din Firoz (d. 1236) and

his vizier Malik Nizam al-Mulk Junaidi. Besides, he also comprised a verse on the elevation of Shams Dabir's office as the *mustaufi-i-mamalik* (Auditor-General of the Sultanate) under Sultan Nasir al-Din Mahmud (r.1246-66) who conferred him the title *Malikal-Kalam* (Lord of Eloquence) (Qawwas, 1999; Badauni, 1868; Sijzi, 1894).

Amir Khusrau (b.1253) was an admirable Indian poet in Persian, whose achievements were acknowledged by the Iranians. He was a visionary writer of both prose and poetry and in both fields, he has left a sizable corpus, but his genius sparkled most evidently in poetry. In prose, his five-volume *Ijaza-i-Khusravi* and *Khazain al-Futuh* are incredibly renowned. In poetry and historical *mathnavis* he left behind a number of anthologies. He effectively served seven Sultans and was reckoned amongst the very close adherents of Shaykh Nizam al-Din Auliya. He died on 18 Shawwal 725/26 September 1325 and was buried beside the tomb of Shaykh Nizam al-Din Auliya. A coeval of Amir Khusrau was Amir Hasan Sijzi (d. 1336), the celebrated author of *Fawaid al-Fuad*, a compendium of *malfuzat* (sayings) of Shaykh Nizam al-Din Auliya (Mirza, 1962).

Zia al-Din Barani (d.1357) was a fabled historian, jurist, and political theorist, and the author of *Tarikh-i-Firoz Shahi* and *Fatwa-i-Jahandari*. *Tarikh-i-Firoz Shahi* is an invaluable source of the reign of Sultan Ghiyasuddin Balban (r.1266-87) to that of the first six years of Sultan Firoz Shah Tughluq's reign, whereas *Fatawa-i-Jahandari* is a book on political philosophy and diplomacy and guidance for good governance. He is the earliest historian notable to have documented the socio-economic conditions of the period, mainly with respect to the Delhi Sultanate. Maulana Zia al-Din Sunami, an esteemed scholar of spiritual sciences, was a specialist on *tafsir* and *fiqh*. During the reigns of Ala al-Din Khalji and Muhammad Tughluq he served a *muhtasib* (Supervisor of Public Morals) and authored a treatise in Arabic entitled *Nisab al-Ihtisab* as a guide for *muhtasibs*. In this book, he elaborated the definition, significance, and objectives of *hisbah* and examined in detail the duties of the *muhtasib*. It became a source book for several judicial works, including *Fatawa-i-Firozshahi* and *Fatawa-i-Hammadiah* compiled during the 16<sup>th</sup> century (Barani, 2005; Islam, 2005). Maulana Razi al-Din Hasan al-Saghani (d. 1252) from Badaun, began his career as *naib-i-mushrif* (Deputy Account Officer) in Koil (Aligarh). He climbed to be a reputed scholar and afterwards composed



*Mashariq-al-Anwar*, the most popular anthology of hadith during the medieval period, which comprised an essential part of the syllabus (Sijzi, 1894; Nizami, 2002).

Kabir al-Din, son of Taj al-Din Iraqi, an expert in *dabiri* (secretarial) skills and the art of *insha*, was a court historian of Sultan Ala al-Din Khalji (r.1296-1316). He was named as *Amir-i-dad-i Lashkar* (Administrator of Lashkar), and recorded *Fathnama* (Letters of Victory), which ran into various volumes. He also authored *Tarikh-i-Alai*, which assessed the career and accomplishments of Ala al-Din Khalji (Barani, 2005; Lal, 1980). Ahmad Hasan Abdusi (d.1351), famous as Taj al-Mulk, a noble of Sultan Ghiyas al-Din Tughluq (r.1320-25) who accompanied Sultan's Lakhnauti expedition in 1324, and wrote both *Basatin-ul Uns* and *Sadr-i-'Ala. Basatin-ul Uns* (Gardens of Love), a Hindu narrative written in a figurative style Persian completed in 1325. Sultan Muhammad Tughluq (r.1325-51) elevated him as *Dabir-i-Khas* (Special Secretary), designating him the title *Taj al-Mulk* (Crown of Kingdom) (Dehlavi, 2010; Rashid, 1969; Jackson, 1999). The renowned literary persona under the Tughluq was Malik Ain al-Mulk, commonly well-known as Ain al-Mulk Mahru, authored several works on different sciences, including *Tarassul-i-Ain al-Mulki*, usually known as *Insha-i-Mahru*, and anthology of letters that attests to his literary talent and is considered as a model of the *insha literature*. It is also an incredibly valuable source of historical material about the period (Barani, 2005; Afif, 1891; Zilli, 2000).

Malik Shams al-Din Abu Rija, alias Ziya al-Mulk, the *mustaufi-i-mamalik* (Comptroller General), was an intellectual and capable *qasida* writer under Firoz Shah. Ibn Battuta arrived at India in 1333 and became the Qazi of Delhi, penning a lengthy ode to Sultan Muhammad Tughluq, and his travelogue *Tuhfat al-Nuzzar fi Gharaib al-Amsar wa Ajaib al-Asfar*, widely recognized as his *Rehla*, was a useful work for the fourteenth century Muslim world (Ibn Battuta, 1953; Selin, 1997). Malik Qabul Qara Khan, a legal expert under Firoz Shah Tughluq, composed a legal digest entitled *Fatawa-i-Qara Khani* for the assistance of judges (Hadi, 1995). Aziz al-Din ibn Abdullah (Mutahhar of Kara) arrived from Iran and Firoz Shah appointed him as Qazi of Kara (near Allahabad). He is recognized for his *qasidas* exalting Firoz Shah and his successor Nasir al-Din Mahmud Shah. He paid homage to Ain al-Mulk and his sons, Malik Husam al-Din and Karim al-Din, in

a number of *qasidas*. Qazi Zahir Dihlavi was a wonderful poet under Nasir al-Din Mahmud Shah Tughluq. His *Diwan* (anthology) is full of *qasidas* in homage to Mahmud (Badauni, 1868). Yahya b. Ahmad Sirhindi, a courtier of Mubarak Shah, the Saiyid ruler authored *Tarikhi-Mubarakshahi* as a mark of appreciation to the Sultan. Masnad-i-'Ali Mian Bhu'a, the vizier and sadr of Sikandar Lodi (r. 1489-1517), had special taste in the field of *ilm-i-tibb* (medicine), and composed the *Tibb-i-Sikandar Shahi*. Mian Bhu'a, after attaining command over Sanskrit, studied the Ayurvedic system of medicine, which he is amalgamating with *tibb-i-unani* (Greco-Arabic medicine) to yield *Ma'adan al-Shifa-i-Sikandar Shahi*, using diverse Sanskrit classics like *Ja Deskarat*, *Ras Ratnako*, *Suangdhar*, and *Chintama* as his source materials (Mushtaqi, 2002; Rashid, 1969).

Over the subsequent eight centuries the people of India considered the Persian language the most appropriate for producing their works on the various subjects like mathematics, astronomy, astrology, metaphysics, chemistry, medicine, logic, philosophy, mysticism, ethics, law, music and the other fine arts, geography, sociology, religious studies, history, biography, travelling and the others. Many Sufi Silsilahs (orders) and the exponents of the important scholars of jurisprudence came from Persia to India. Initially most of them were Persians who developed their thoughts in a Persian environment, but local Indians became fully integrated into the Persian high culture emerging around Delhi, and contributed massively to the development of numerous forms of cultural expression and scientific achievement. Poetry was a particularly respected art and profession in the Indian Subcontinent, and the classic work *Sherul Ajam* by Allama Shibli No'mani (1857-1914) explicates the presence of Persian writers in India, and their impact on Urdu poetry. Hafiz Shirazi (1315-90) and Omer Khayyam (1048-1131) remain popular in the Indian Subcontinent, while Iqbal (1877-1938) is famous in Iran. His famous Persian *masnavis* (anthologies) *Asrar-i-Khudi* (Secrets of the Self), *Rumuz-i-Bekhudi* (Hints of Selflessness), *Payam-e-Mashriq* (The Message of the East) are incredibly popular in Iran.

## Conclusion

Muslim contributions to Indian and human civilization during the period of the Delhi Sultanate reflect a cosmopolitan and diverse society premised on peace, security, and prosperity - in modern parlance, Muslim rule in India facilitated socio-economic development, and greatly galvanized cultural exchange with Persia, Central Asia, and the rest of the world, leading to a great cultural renaissance in the Subcontinent. The Persian language began to be the predominant language of elites in India at this juncture, which in the Islamic East was analogous to Latin in Europe during the same period, but local intellectuals continued to esteem and value their indigenous Indian cultures and heritage, and contributed greatly to all fields of knowledge and inquiry, most notably in letters, architecture, and medicine. In the current era of nativist political entrepreneurs seeking to enforce economic exploitation while pandering to demagoguery, the genuine civilizational attainment of the Delhi Sultanate and its role in improving the lives of Muslims, Hindus, and others offers a reminder of the real potential for human communities to come together and serve their Creator in peace and harmony.

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