SOCI-CULTURAL LIFE OF THE NOBILITY
UNDER THE DELHI SULTANS

ABSTRACT
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In recent past historians have been increasingly attracted to the study of the Sultanate nobility. Serious and sustained efforts have been made by S. B. P. Nigam, Irfan Habib, M. Athar Ali, I. H. Siddiqui and others to explain the origin and evolution of the nobility, their class and clans, their social composition, and above all, nobility as a political and administrative institution. The historians thus would have us to believe that the history of the Sultanate period was the history of the achievements and failures of the Turkish nobility because during this period many Sultans were themselves nobles. It has been further suggested that under the Delhi Sultans, the social composition of the nobility underwent a significant transformation as a result of the inclusion of autochthonous social groups and socially inferior individuals in the ruling class. Thus, the socio-cultural aspects of the Sultanate nobility have been ignored and not received adequate attention. However, in present thesis entitled *Socio-Cultural Life of the Nobility under the Delhi Sultans* an effort has been made to fulfill this gap in the history of the Delhi Sultanate. However, the present thesis is divided into eight chapters highlighting the different aspects of the nobles of the Delhi Sultanate:

**Chapter I: Extant and Sources of Income:**

It sheds light on the salaries and assignments of the nobles. Besides high salaries they were given lucrative assignments in the form of *iqtas*. Another source of their accumulated wealth was expensive gifts, bribe and corruption. They accumulated huge treasure and spent extravagantly on luxuries and even provided charity to the needy people. Because of pomp and show they sometimes took loans from the wealthy merchants of Delhi and were living continuously under debt. Thus, the present study shows that besides the high amount they received in salaries, the nobles were assigned lands and received a lot of wealth from gifts and rewards. Some of them also amassed wealth through bribe and corruption. However, the nobles were rich and prosperous and had hoards of wealth.

**Chapter II: Etiquettes and Norms of Comportments:**

Sources refer to the royal courts and participation of the nobles in the court rituals. The sources even discuss the courts held by the provincial governors, processions of the Sultans and of the nobles, court ceremonies, noble’s *harem* and
their attitude towards Sultans, their colleagues, other nobles, slaves as well as common people. Investigation suggests that there were certain prescribed manners and etiquettes performed by the nobles at the royal court and at the courts held by themselves in their respective provinces. The most popular prescribed norms and etiquettes, based on Sassanid court were *sijda, khakbos, pailbos* and *dastbos*. They were expected to perform certain etiquettes at the time of meeting the Sultan or with other nobles or at the time of receiving a royal gift or a royal *farman* and also at the dining carpet. The chapter also analysed the noble’s behaviour with the Sultans and also with other nobles, officials, troops and with their subjects and often with the common people.

**Chapter III: Feast, Festivals and Ceremonies:**

This chapter highlights the celebration of feasts and banquets at a larger scale on different occasions. They celebrated festivals and commemorate other social functions and spent much amount on these occasions. These occasions were celebrated in great enthusiasm. Nobles not only attended the royal feasts but also invited other nobles and officials at their palaces for feasts. Thus, large kitchens were seems to be maintained by the nobles and they spent huge sums on feasts, festivals and other ceremonies. Evidences show that the celebration and commemoration of several ceremonies such as: *Ramzan, Id-ul-Fitr, Id-al-Qurban, Shab-i-Barat, Muharram, Ashura, Nauroz*, birth and death anniversaries of Prophet of Islam etc. They used to distribute food on these occasions. The participation of musicians, singers as well as lavish decoration and awards added the elegance in these festivities. Besides festivals, marriage ceremonies held important place in the socio-cultural life of the nobles under the Delhi Sultans. These events were celebrated with great gaiety and were sometimes sources of fun and entertainment for the ruling classes.

**Chapter IV: Games and Entertainment:**

The nobles considered games and music as the source of entertainment and recreation to relieve themselves from the stress of political and administrative engagements. The Indian game chess, *chaugan* (polo) and hunting were popular during Sultanate period. Thus, both indoor and outdoor games were enjoyed by them, hunting being the most popular one. Barani, Amir Khusrau, Afif, Ibn Battuta
and Mushtaqi emphasis on hunting show that it was the primary game. The nobles followed Sultans in their hunting excursions with all their necessary requirements.

Music was another source for entertainment of the Sultanate nobility. Musical instruments such as drums, reed pipes, flutes, trumpets and haut boys were among the maratibs of the high ranked nobles. Musicians and singers with musical instruments, duff, nai, chang and rabab, participated in marriage ceremony and even followed the nobles in their journeys. Both male and female musicians and singers were patronized by the nobles. In this regard Ibn Battuta’s travel account is of much significance. The compilation of the works on Indian music, Ghunyat-ul-Munya by anonymous author and Lahjit-i-Sikandar Shahi by Yahya Qabuli are worth mentioning. Despite restriction on music in the light of sharia, the nobles used it as a source of amusement. Convivial and drinking parties, garden parties, qawwali and story-tellers, dancers, jesters acrobats, jugglers and other entertainers seems to be the sources of recreation for the nobility.

For their entertainment, convivial and drinking parties, garden party, sama and qawwali parties were organized. Besides, they patronized story-tellers, jesters, acrobats and jugglers. They enjoyed music, dance and patronized musicians and singers.

Chapter V: Household and Domestic Life:

Nobles lived very luxurious life, thus the chapter highlights the living condition and domestic life of the nobles focusing on the houses, varieties of dresses, food and dishes and further an attempt has been made to highlight As means of conveyance they used decorated palanquins for short distance journeys while horses, camels, elephants and boats were used for long distance journeys. The chapter further investigates the hareem establishment, slavery, matrimonial relations and marriages, practice of divorce and custom of dowry prevalent in the elite society of the Delhi Sultanate. Polygamy was in practice thus they maintained large harems.

Chapter VI: Virtues and Vices:

The virtues and vices among the nobles of Delhi Sultans have been analyzed in this chapter. They presented gifts to each other, provided charities to the poor and needy persons, gave assistance in the marriages of the poor and orphan girls,
provided allowances to the widows, distributed free-food (*langars*), provided famine relief and provisions for the travellers and established educational institutions. Study supports the fact that they were generous in promoting agriculture, providing security to the people, welfare measures for the common people, patronized trade and commerce, constructed public utility structures: wells, step-wells, canals and tanks etc. contrary to their charitable acts, bribe and corruption, and wine drinking were the darker side of their life. Nobles of both high rank as well as lower ranks were involved in bribery and corruption so much so that even *diwan-i-wazarat, diwan-i-arz*, royal mint and judiciary were not free from corruption. Thus, both the piety and moral aberrations motivated the elite society of the Delhi Sultanate.

**Chapter VII: Literature, Science and Craft:**

This chapter highlights the literary activities of the nobles as well as their meaningful patronage to the other scholars. As a result, literature on different subjects like Indian tales, *masnavis, qasidas* (Panegyric), history, *farhang* literature (Lexicographical work), *insha* (letter writing), *fiqh* (Religious literature) *tafsir* (Commentary on Quran), *fatawa* (Muslim Jurisprudence), *tibb* (medicine), astronomy and astrology, mathematics, gemology, mining and metallurgy, architecture, numismatics and music was composed and compiled. They were not only interested in the study of astronomy and astrology but promoted research in these subjects and installed astrolabe (astrological devices) at their palaces. They were experts in medical sciences and alchemy. By inventing paper and artificial pearl and other things from ivory and mica they contributed much in the field of craft and technology. Thus, the contribution of the nobility in the field of literature, science and craft is quite remarkable.

**Chapter VIII: Constructional Activities:**

The other remarkable aspect of the nobles of Delhi Sultans was their constructional activities. Buildings of both religious and secular nature were constructed by them. Study suggests that the constructional activities undertaken by the noble was not cultural rather fiscal since it provided employment to the common people. The buildings constructed by the nobles were not merely utilitarian but symbolically conveyed the valor and grandeur of the ruling classes. The building construction activity was, indeed, a socio-cultural activity and the resources
expended on the construction of buildings brought back for the nobles prestige, honour and legitimacy.

Thus, in short the nobility under Delhi Sultans played the decisive role in enriching the socio-cultural life in consolidation and integration of the Delhi Sultanate particularly under the Sultans: Ilutmish, Balban, Alaeddin Khalji and Muhammad bin Tughlaq. Though the sources of information are scanty and scattered, attention has been made to properly analyzed the available data to highlight the social and cultural life of the nobility under the Delhi Sultans.

In short, the nobles as administrators and aristocrats not only involved in their allotted administrative responsibilities in their specified regions rather they had enjoyed their lively social and cultural life in Indian and Perso-Islamic perspectives. However, the nobles as governors and muqtis and other high ranked posts were deputed in the far-flung regions of the Sultanate. In their respective assignments, they were exposed to their regional people and imbibed their local culture and customs and, in turn, they also infused in them their Perso-Islamic culture. Thus, the assimilation of two cultures to which we may also termed the composite culture are evident in their marriages, feasts and festivals, living and food habits, games and entertainments etc. However, the nobles of the Sultanate period not only acted as 'connector' between the rulers and the ruled rather as 'connector' of two cultures being a patronisers of art and literature, music and paintings as well as builders of religious and secular edifices and as supervisors of public welfare works and, above all, as 'innovators' in the field of science, technology and crafts.

In this regard different primary (published and unpublished) sources are used. Works of Hasan Nizami, Minhaj Siraj, Amir Khusrau, Zia Barani, Shams Siraj Asif, Ibn Battuta, Isami, Yahya Sirhindi, Rizquallah Mushtaqi, Abdullah, Ahmad Yadgar, al-Badaoni and Ferishta are significant. These Persian sources are supplemented with hagiographical (malfuz) literature to get a better insight into the socio-cultural life of the nobles under the Delhi Sultans. Besides, a number of Proceedings, Journals, Encyclopedias, Archival material, Survey Reports, Epigraphic records for technical terms Comprehensive Persian English Dictionary is of F. Steingass have been properly used.