CHAPTER - XVI

ISLAMIC LEARNING & INTELLECTUAL

THOUGHT IN THE REIGN OF SHER SHAH

The fame acquired by the Delhi Sultanate in the beginning of the fourteenth century as the most resourceful sultanate of the Islamic world attracted men of learning and art from different countries. The capital of the Empire, Delhi had also emerged a world centre of culture in consequence. In fact, no city in the entire Muslim world could surpass Delhi in grandeur during the fourteenth century. Even Cairo in Egypt could be compared with it in respect of size and population but not in beauty and magnificence. Writing about the year 1344, Shihab-u’d-Din al-Umari, a scholar of Damascus says about the schools, colleges and hospitals in Delhi. "There are one thousand madrassas (colleges) in Delhi, one of which is for the Shafi’ites and the rest for the Hanafites. There are about seventy hospitals (bimaristan). Here Bimaristan is called Dar’ul Shafa". Zia


2. Shihab u’d-Din al-Umari, op.cit., p.36.
u’d-Din Barani glows with pride when he refers to the eminence of Delhi’s scholars who could be compared with Imam Ghazali and Imam Razi in stature. He also writes emphatically that scholars came from foreign lands to get their books approved by the Indian ‘Ulema (scholars).  

But this centre of culture and learning was completely sacked along with its satellite towns by Amir Timur in 1398. Its elite sought refuge in different regional kingdoms that arose in the wake of Timur’s invasion. Delhi continued to be a place of no consequence till Sultan Bahlol Lodi’s accession to the throne in 1451.

With the advent of Sultan Bahlol Lodi to the throne in 1451 A.D. an era of economic recovery and cultural progress began once again in the history of the Delhi Sultanate. The liberal patronage extended by the Lodi Sultan to the teachers and men of learning led to the revival of old seats of learning in Delhi and the establishment of madrassas (educational Institutions) and seminaries in the provincial cities and towns alike.

With the accession of Sikandar Lodi to the throne in 1482, intellectual activities increased, for the new Sultan was a cultured and highly educated man. Basically interested in

rational sciences, he sought to overcome contemporary prejudices and investigated facts for himself in order to find out the truth. During his reign, not only the academic standards were raised but scholars and scientists were encouraged to apply their knowledge to practical use, suggest new ideas to modify old concepts and introduce new crafts. Mushtaki says that the educational work was carried with such zeal that the sons of the nobility and soldiers applied themselves to the acquisition of knowledge. Nizam u'd-Din Ahmad also refers to the educational progress during this reign in these words: "learning gained popularity during his auspicious reign. The sons of nobles and soldiers seriously pursued their study."

Freed from the worries of livelihood, the teachers and scholars set to carry on their intellectual work with zeal and devotion, with the result that they made substantial contribution to intellectual thought and literature.

We also find some interesting pieces of information, contained in the Tarikh-i-Sher Shahi and Lataif-i-Quddusi, bearing on the system of education at different levels. The account furnished by 'Abbas Sarwani about Mian Farid's (later Sher Shah Sur) education is indicative of the fact

4. Wakiat-i-Mushtaki, f. 8b.
5. Tabaqat-i-Akbari, i/170
that even a petty amir like Mian Hasan Sur could make proper arrangements for the education of his sons in a small town of Sasaram (district Shahabad in Bihar). Though Mian himself does not seem to have been an educated man, he was very much interested in the education of his children as learning and sophistication were thought to be passport to the state service and association with the high-ups in the society. It also reveals that for higher education, a student had to go to some city where he studied under the guidance of celebrated scholars. Mian Farid went from Sasaram (district Shahabad in Bihar) to Jaunpur that was the provincial headquarter of the region and had famous colleges and seminaries since the days of the Sharqi Sultans. In Jaunpur Madrassa (College), Farid is said to have studied Kafiya\(^6\) (prosody) along with the commentary, written in Persian by Shihab u’\(\dot{d}\)-Din Daulatabadi, classics of Persian poetry, Islamic Jurisprudence, and historical literature, in addition to the works bearing on the ways and manners of the princes and state craft.\(^7\) Like Mian Farid Sur, Shaikh Rukn u’\(\dot{d}\)-Din son of Shaikh Abdul Quddus Gangohi came to Delhi from Shahabad (district Karnal in Haryana) for the

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6. The title of Kafiya is Al-Kifayat-fil-Nahnav. It is a work, treating of the science how the correct prose is written and errors in the selection of words avoided. It was written by Jamal u’\(\dot{d}\)-Din bin Abu Amr Usman. Shaikh Shihab u’\(\dot{d}\)-Din Daulatabadi, the courtier of Sultan Ibrahim Sharqi wrote the marginal translation of this work in Persian which became very popular subsequently.

7. Abbas Sarwani, Tarikh-i-Sher Shahi, ed. Imam u’\(\dot{d}\)-Din, Dacca 1964, p.31.
completion of his education. In Delhi he specialised in Logic, Jurisprudence, tafsir (exegeses of the Quran) and hadith (traditions of the Prophet) under the guidance of master scholars. The details furnished by him show that a student, studying at a higher level, attended the lectures of the masters known for their command over special branches of Islamic learning. But such facilities for the students to benefit from a number of eminent teachers who had specialised in particular branches of knowledge were generally available in the metropolitan cities.

Of the leading scholars, engaged in teaching profession, Shaikh Abdullah Talbuni and his brother, Shaikh Azizullah Talbuni were considered the greatest of intellectuals of their age. Attracted by the munificence and affection of Sultan Sikander Lodi towards the men of letters, both of the brothers came from Multan to Delhi during the early years of his reign. Being educationists by profession, they are said to have played an important part in reviving the traditions of scholarship in Delhi. Shaikh Abdullah settled down in Delhi while his brother, ‘Azizullah selected Sambhal for his permanent stay.

As regards Jamal Khan Dehlevi, he was the grandson of Shaikh Sama ud-Din Kambo and born at Siri (Delhi) in 1490 during

the reign of Sikandar Lodi. For his mastery over the rational sciences and strict adherence to the law of shariat (Islamic law), Islam Shah Sur appointed him as the chief qazi of his Empire.⁹

Mention should be made of the Delhi born alim, Maulana Shoeb who is paid homage by the contemporary scholars for the diffusion of Quranic knowledge in Delhi and the region around it. Maulana Shoeb was the son of Maulana Minhaj, the Mufti of Delhi during the reign of Sultan Bahlol Lodi. Shaikh Ruknu'd-Din, who attended his lectures in Delhi and was deeply impressed by his knowledge and personality, says that he possessed eloquence as well as knowledge. He delivered lectures on the tafsir (exegetes of the Quran) of the Divine word from the pulpit of his mosque. The gathering of listeners was mostly composed of Haffaz (those who committed the Quran to memory) and other learned persons.¹⁰ Shaikh Abdul Haque Muhadith adds: "He (the Maulana) was angelic both in character and appearance." His sweet voice had such effect at lecture time that even pedestrians became motionless as soon as it reached their ears. The grandees and scholars of the city came to listen to his lectures. He was also a teacher and most of the Scholars of Delhi and the

¹⁰. Lataif-i-Quddusi, op.cit. Latifa 73, p.61.
places around had been his students in the beginning of their student life.11

There appear to have been many other scholars of distinction who flourished during this period but information about their achievements is wanting. Shaikh Rukn-ud-Din refers to a number of them in his Lataif-i-Quddusi, implying that they enjoyed prestige for their erudition. In particular, he makes mention of Muhammad Mubarak Jaunpuri, Maulana Ibrahin, Qazi Danishmand Thanesari and Maulana Abdullah Danishmard Dehlevi who were familiar with sufi philosophy and doctrines and also held scholarly discussions with the learned representatives of sufism.12

Another development of great importance, resulting from the administrative and cultural reforms introduced by Sher Shah and Afghans was the learning by Hindus of Persian language and literature. Nizam-u'd-din Ahmad writes that after promulgation of the royal order encouraging the use of Persian for account and record keeping and for administrative purposes, the Hindus also began to learn the Persian language. Hitherto they were not compelled by the circumstances to acquire knowledge of it.13 Ferishta seems

12. Lataif-i-Quddusi, pp. 42-43, 44, 47.
to have followed the author of the Tabaqat-i-Akbari in this regard. He also says that the Hindus started learning Persian since the reign of Sultan Sikandar Lodi.  

Badaoni informs us about the Brahman Dynkar, who had gained fame as a gifted poet and a scholar of Muslim traditional sciences. The Brahman gave the Muslim students instructions in books of sciences.

In the final analysis it may be stated that the Afghan period, in general, and Sher Shah Sur’s, in particular, in the history of the Delhi Sultanate not only witnessed the revival of old educational institutions but also the proliferation of culture and learning. The seminaries and madrassas, founded by the scholars and maintained by the state grants even in the towns, turned up distinguished scholars who rose into prominence during the subsequent period. They also made important contributions to the Indo-persian literature. The ‘ulama and literati of Akbar’s reign, with a few exceptions, were the products of the intellectual efflorescence that can be described as the renaissance of the Delhi elite culture during the preceding period. In short, the elite of the Sur period made substantial contribution to Indian aristocratic culture and

14. Ferishta, Vol.II p.188.
provided building materials for the construction of the edifice of Mughal culture later on.