



*Journal of Advances and  
Scholarly Researches in  
Allied Education*

*Vol. IV, Issue No. VIII,  
October-2012, ISSN 2230-  
7540*

**AN ASSESSMENT OF THE BRITISH AND INDIAN  
HISTORIOGRAPHY DURING THE 20<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY:  
THE EARLY TURKISH RULE IN NORTHERN  
INDIA**

AN  
INTERNATIONALLY  
INDEXED PEER  
REVIEWED &  
REFEREED JOURNAL

# An Assessment of the British and Indian Historiography during the 20<sup>th</sup> Century: The Early Turkish Rule in Northern India

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**Abstract –** The 20<sup>th</sup> century histories written by the British and Indian historians on early Turkish rule help us to know about the state of affairs during the 13<sup>th</sup> century. They enrich our knowledge of the socio-political, economic and cultural milieu present at those times. The histories written by British and Indian historians had different set of objectives and different aims. But, constant improvements and new beginnings in the field of historiography helped its cause. However no work has been published till date on the 20<sup>th</sup> century historiography of Indian and British historians on the early Turkish Rule in northern India. The present investigation is a humble attempt in this direction. This work is divided into six chapters with an introduction at the beginning and conclusion at the end. It is an Endeavour to trace the characteristics and developments in the field of historiography during 20<sup>th</sup> century and makes an assessment of the historical writings on polity, society, economy, religion and institutions of early Turkish rule. An assessment of these writings initiated new insights and supplements the Knowledge already diffused through the writings of 20<sup>th</sup> century Historian. A movement towards the study of the religious and cultural history of the peoples of the sub-continent during the early Muslim period was perceptible both in periodical literature appearing in English and also occasionally in monographs. Once again, it cannot be said that British historians have taken any prominent place in this shift of attention. Not much work had been done on the religious aspects of the early Turkish rule history.

**Keywords:** Turkish Rule, Northern India, 13<sup>th</sup> Century, 20<sup>th</sup> Century, Religious, History, Cultural, Political History, Historiography, Technique.

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## INTRODUCTION

The Three literary works with direct bearing on the history, political institutions, religion and politics of the early Turkish rule in northern India appeared in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The latter can hardly be accepted as illustrating the practical working of caste in Northwestern India in the 13<sup>th</sup> to 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. There is frequent mention of the urban revolution" which followed the establishment of Muslim power, but the author did not tell what this consisted of except that the "impure" Hindu castes were not allowed to dwell within the city walls [1]. A dispassionate examination of the social information expounded in the Sanskrit authors of the period immediately preceding Muslim conquests Kalhana, Kshemendra, Somadeva and so on - may yet improve the picture of Indian urban life. Carefully conducted excavations may in future reveal considerable differences between pre - and post - Muslim cities, but the evidence which would support or rebut these contentions is as yet lacking. Three works about the individual Sultans, Qutbududin Aibak, Iltutmish and Razia who ruled in 13<sup>th</sup> century had also appeared. A.K. Srivastva's Life and Times of Kutb-ud-

din Aibak; Rekha Joshi's, Sultan Iltutmish; and Rafiq Zakaria's Razia: Queen of India, are three important monographs which shed light on reign of these Sultans of Delhi. But, the most important historiographical intervention in the study of this period, which is still extremely influential in the making of university syllabi and trends in research, was made by Mohammad Habib in a series of articles published intermittently through the 1920s and 1950s. Contribution of another important British historian, Peter Jackson, who is well known as an authority in this field, to Islamic scholarship range from the banks of the Ganges and the Indus to Central Asia and Iran in the Mongol epoch as well as Middle Eastern crusader studies. Throughout his scholarly career, Peter Jackson has been preoccupied with the interplay between the 13<sup>th</sup> Century Mongol Empire of the Chinghizids and the history of the Delhi Sultanate. He contributed a monograph and a number of articles on the history of Delhi Sultanate. His work entitled, The Delhi Sultanate: a Political and Military History [2-5] is learned, full of erudition, and judicious, and it

must be counted one of the most distinguished contributions to Indian history in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE:

The three different objectives in view but also adopted different modes of investigation. Their conclusions and themes, in some respects, were not identical, but there is considerable similarity in the questions they asked. An assessment of Habibullah's work brings certain points to notice. In the first place, the Slave kings from Aibak to Kayumur are designated by the author as Mamluk, a foreign denomination used for the studies in central Asia and not India [6]. The early Sultans who ruled over northern India had been purchased and reared either by Muhammad Ghuri or Ilutmish and are recorded in history as Ghulams or Bandagan-i-Turk and not Mamluk. Secondly, "Society and Culture" devoted to the cultural development of the age has done scant justice to the literary progress of the time. The circle had its own novelty. It functioned like a seminar in which various topics were discussed and verses exchanged. The circle was attended by Amir Hasan and Amir Khusraw, the luminaries of the age, and Shaikh Sa'di, the celebrated poet of Persia was invited there. Although the poet failed to respond to the invitation favorably, yet the fact that the invitation was extended to Sheikh Sadi indicates the wider range of Indian scholars and their knowledge of the outside world.

The present investigation is a humble attempt in this direction. This work is divided into six chapters with an introduction at the beginning and conclusion at the end. It is an Endeavour to trace the characteristics and developments in the field of historiography during 20<sup>th</sup> century and makes an assessment of the historical writings on polity, society, economy, religion and institutions of early Turkish rule [7-9].

## SOCIO-CULTURAL MILIEU OF TURKISH RULE:

The works of early British historians had a strong influence to these compendia of history material, for example Stanley Lane Poole's (Medieval India Under Mohammedan Rule, London, 1903), Vincent Smith's (The Oxford history of India, London, 1919) and W. Haig (ed.) (The Cambridge History of India, Turks and Afghans, London, 1928). All these authors used the data provided by Elliot and Dowson and by the Bibliotheca Indica series almost to the exclusion of any other. It was a self-imposed limitation, writes Peter Hardy. Moreover, it was not true that the only literary evidence available to scholars was that provided by the works of medieval Muslim historians. The India office Library, the British Museum and the library of the Asiatic Society of Bengal, to mention only the most accessible, contained many works on Indo-Muslim religious observance, jurisprudence, mysticism and 'political thought' as well as collections of belles-lettres and poetry. Except, F.A. Steingass (A Comprehensive Persian English Dictionary, Delhi, 1973 reprint), no

major contribution by any of the British historian was made in the modern studies of development of Persian culture, traditions and poetry in the 13<sup>th</sup> century.

The first book on social history which appeared in India during the 1930's, when political history dominated the scene of historiography on medieval India was K.M. Ashraf's, Life and Conditions of the People of Hindustan [10]. His approach was non-communal and nationalistic and he attempts to study the life and conditions of the people of medieval India in economic terms and not on religious lines. 'The Sultan as a Private Person', 'The Sultan as a public Person', 'The Court', 'Rural Life', 'the Standards of life', 'Domestic Life' and so on, yet it is uncharitable on the part of Peter Hardy to say that his picture of society, "is not dynamic but static; the work is an essay on dissection of a corpse not a description of a living, moving, changing organism." Ten years before K.M. Ashraf's monograph, in 1925, Yusuf Ali published his book, Making of India [11] and claimed that the Muslims 'brought a better organization and a manlier culture in India.' His approach towards the writing of medieval social history is liberal and nationalistic.

Mohammad Habib observed two movements which helped in formation of early Delhi Sultanate. The first is the supremacy of the Turks as a military and governing class. Not less important is the second movement, which E.G. Browne calls the 'Persian Renaissance'. He further says the rise of minor dynasties in central Asia began to help in the revival of the Persian language, first poetry and then prose [12]. The greatest patrons were of course, the Ghaznavids. The early Turkish rule in the northern India was built by both of these forces, the Turkish Mamluk and the Persian intelligentsia. The Turkish Mamluk was its founders and the Persian intelligentsia classes and their cultural traditions were its identity.

Indian historian U.N. Day's The Government of the Sultanate, discuss in its introduction, 'The Model of the Government' which deals with the inheritance of the institutions of the early Turkish rulers. He traces the background of the institution inherited by the Delhi Sultans from the times of Muhammad the Prophet. He says, "It was in Persia that the Muslims or the Saracens came in contact with culture far superior to their own... they could not resist copying the Persian system of government and Persian culture. He further adds that it was at Baghdad that the influence of the Arabs faded and the Persian influence began to dominate under the Abbasids. When the Abbasid Caliphate began to decline and distant provinces turned into independent Muslim kingdoms, this pattern was adopted by them with necessary modifications. The Turkish Sultans of Delhi also adopted many offices from this pattern and made additions and alterations in them as demanded by the various administrative problems that they were called upon to solve.

In the early 1950's, Muhammad Habib put forth of 'Urban Revolution' in northern India during the 13<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Muhammad Habib was the first historians who talked of social and professional mobility during the 13<sup>th</sup> century [13]. He stressed on certain causes like the migration of Indian workers from outside to inside of the city walls with the coming of Turks; the shariat makes no discrimination whatsoever in the transactions of civil life and treats free contract regardless of the creed of the parties as the basis of the economic order and uplift in social status, equality in religion and freedom of profession etc. He argued these themes in light of classical Marxist position of Islam as an egalitarian social ideology cutting across caste boundaries and creating opportunities for social mobility. It is also evident; however, that K.M. Ashraf's who wrote a book on social history 15 years before Muhammad Habib passed over the concept of mobility in social and professional areas.

### **ECONOMIC CONDITION OF SULTANATE PERIODS:**

One such insight related to the change that might occur owing to external invasions. As we have seen, Marx had thought that Indian history consisted merely of the regimes of "successive intruders", without their affecting any change in the basic social structure. But Kosambi saw that such intrusions could not be without some effect. He recognized in particular that "the Islamic raiders Broke down hidebound customs in the adoption and transmission of new technique. Kosambi felt nevertheless that the chance represented no more than the intensification of a process of feudalization that had already been set in motion in ancient India. In this, his position was different from that adopted by Mohammad Habib who argued (in 1952) that the chances resulting from the invasions were so sweeping as to constitute an "urban revolution" that was accompanied secondarily (in point of time) by a "rural revolution. Investigations in the economic past of the Indian subcontinent were initiated by the British historian in late 19<sup>th</sup> century. The forms of evidence used by historians have been the literary genre, epigraphic remains, and archaeological findings including numismatic material. Virtually none of these had had a quantitative dimension, either absolute or relative. As a result economic historians, especially of India's 13<sup>th</sup> century, have taken an anecdotal approach to their subject. Starting as they have with a black canvas, the energies of the economic historians concerned with the medieval period have been absorbed in gathering together and categorizing a great mass of independent facts gleaned from the primary sources. For the longest time, W.H. Moreland remained the sole historian whose focus on the relationship between the state and the peasantry remained outside the fold of Sultanate historiography [14]. Moreland argued that the revenue collection

functions of the Muslim state in India were the most potent factor in the distribution of the national income; while its action in regard to distribution inevitably reacted on production, so much so that we are justified in concluding that, next only to the weather, the administrator was the dominant fact in the economic life of the country.

### **RELIGIOUS PRACTICES OF SULTANATE:**

During the 20<sup>th</sup> century studies on religious practices and traditions of the early Turkish rule have made sufficient headway, in spite of the limited scope and availability of contemporary source materials. The study of medieval Islam as a religion with a total impact on Hindustan was not wholly neglected by 20<sup>th</sup> century historians even when, as during the first forty years of this century, narrative political history dominated modern historiography on medieval India. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Thomas Arnold, Murray Titus, Mohammad Wahid Mirza and nearer independence and partition, Mohammad Habib, A.B.M. Habibullah and K. A. Nizami have directed their attention to the religious aspects of the Muslim 'presence' in India. But it would not be unfair to say that their contributions, however important individually, did not control the main thrust and the direction of historical works on medieval India before 1947.

James Mill division of Indian history on the basis of religion had a strong influence in the historical writings of early British and Indian historians. Contemporary understanding of Indo-Islamic history have been greatly influenced and sometimes distorted by contemporary agendas or conceptual categories which readily held the past hostage. Inferiority complex among the early Indian historians appears to be one important factor which hampered the cause of historical writings in pre-independence period. Some of these factors had lasting impact over understanding of Indo-Islamic religious practices and traditions. It may be helpful to assess the works of British and Indian historians on religious conditions prevailing in 13<sup>th</sup> Century.

### **CONCLUSION:**

An assessment of Indian and British historiography during the 20<sup>th</sup> century brings into prominence the branches, topics and areas in which sufficient research has been undertaken. It also highlights the gaps to be plugged, and areas in which further research can be pursued. One such area is the nature and function of the state or monarchy in the Mamluk period. The studies in this field are highly influenced by the contemporary political thoughts and agendas in circulation during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This perception of division of Indian history on the basis of religion was also fundamental. Indian history into

three periods and equated them with religions - ancient India with Hindu, medieval India with Muslim and modern India with British period. The colonial mentality and psyche of the rulers enforced a set of historical traditions which also relegated the colony to an inferior nation. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, economic historians remained concerned with society's material relationship. In their channel of inquiry, economic interaction show clear trends based on the aggregate of individual human activities. Current concerns require fairly sophisticated economic records. As these sources are unavailable for the medieval period, economic historians have been relatively slow to address substantive problems or formulate models of past economic activity. In spite of a clear lack of trustworthy statistical data or perhaps because of it, strongly articulated perceptions of the nature of India's medieval economy have become widely propagated. Certain of the putative elements, such as feudalization, decentralization, decline of trade and village self-sufficiency, have become virtual axioms of historic and economic texts. The wealth of information and analysis on Sultanate coinage is one of the glories of the world of knowledge, in the absence of other forms of evidence, which helped in reconstruction of 13<sup>th</sup> century economic history.

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