

Between Sainthood and Sovereignty: The Political Imagination of Afghan India

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INTRODUCTION:

“The rise of the Afghans to power in 1451, resuscitated the Sultanate and the political revival was soon followed by a more significant one in the domain of culture”¹.

In the context of evolving Perso-Indian Statecraft we notice a shift in the 13th and 14th centuries, as the theory of dual power was getting modified. The fundamental distinction between the political order and the sharai order did not disappear but was accommodated within the framework of the ideal type that I will call ‘Islamic royalism’². According to Islamic royalism, the ruler maintained both the political and the sharai order and was therefore the Shadow of God on earth and the ‘Padshah of Islam’.

As described by Mushtaqi, the Afghan Period was characterized by great literary activities; many writers produced works of fiction and legends, such as Padmavat and Madumalti³. Works were produced not only on literature, theology, history and lexicography, but also on such subjects as music, dancing and medicine, research on astronomy was also greatly encouraged. Sikandar Shah marked the apex of literary splendour and the cultural achievements of his time were unrivalled for centuries past. The general atmosphere of peace in which he ascended the throne did, no doubt, foster the cultivation of letters, but it was chiefly his own love of learning and the patronage which he and his nobles extended to the learned that encouraged the scholars to flock to his court.

Contrary to this representation of the Afghans as the dangerous ‘other’, a large corpus of writings in the Persian language, some of them composed by the beleaguered Afghans themselves, celebrated the good old days under the Afghan rulers. The period of the Lodi and Sur sovereigns was clubbed together and perceived as one long tradition, fractured by the advent of the Mughals.⁴ The Afghan rulers drew on the ideals and institutions of medieval Indo-Persian tradition of governance, which were evolved over centuries of interaction between the classical Islamic norms on the one hand, and those of the Persians on the other.⁵

In this essay, we will be tracing the evolution of Indo-Persian ideas of statecraft through the study of the Afghan period rule in India.

Lodi Dynasty:

Sultan Bahlul Lodi:

“Do not raise anyone of the Surs to the rank of amir because they have got ambition for sovereignty.” Sultan Bahlul to his son, Nizam, later Sultan Sikandar.

¹ Hameed-Ud-Din. (1961). Indian Culture in The Late Sultanate Period: A short study. *East and West*, 12(1), 25–39.

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/29754356>

² Indian Statecraft, Greek Political Science and the Muslim Idea of Government Saïd Amir Arjomand State University of New York, 469,

³ Mushtaqi, introduction xvii, Their authors began their work with the praise and description of reigning monarchs.

⁴ R.Aquil 110

⁵ R. Aquil 117

“God in his goodness has granted Afghans the kingdom of Delhi, but the other kings of Hind wish to expel them from the country. The honour of our women is concerned; the lands of Hind are broad and rich, and can afford maintenance to many. Come then, to this country; the name indeed of sovereignty shall remain with me, but whatever countries we may conquer shall be shared between us as brothers”⁶ Bahlul welcomed and rewarded all the Afghans who responded to this plea. In return for military service, he gave the tribal chiefs assignments on the land revenue for themselves and their retainers. The centre no longer directly paid and controlled the army. Instead, each assignee organized and maintained a stipulated body of troops from the revenue of his holding. The Lodi Sultans gave larger grants to individuals than had earlier been the custom. The Sultan could decide disputes between nobles, requisition military forces and apportion and resume assignments, but by and large residual powers remained with the assignees. Similarly, the sultan distributed any goods and treasure from conquest and tribute to the victorious commanders and their followers. A medieval Muslim historian wrote that “Whatever came into his possession, he distributed it all among his troops and reserved nothing for himself.”⁷

The sixteenth century writers have appreciated the ‘good’ deeds and also highlighted the image of Bahlul Lodi as a pious Muslim ruler⁸. Jamali and Mushtaqi, for instance, Jamali wrote in his *Siyar-ul-Arifin* that after the death of Bahlul Lodi his preceptor, Shaykh Sama-ud-Din Kamboh Suhrawardi visited the sultan’s grave. After reciting the prayers, he meditated for a while. Shortly afterwards the shaykh raised his head and remarked that on account of his devotion to the friends of God the sultan was successful both in this world and the hereafter. Mushtaqi noted in his *Waqi‘at-i-Mushtaqi* that Sultan Bahlul held the learned and pious men in respect. He personally heard the complaints of the people and passed suitable orders. From the very beginning of his reign, he attended religious sermons, and used to go to mosque on Friday for congregational prayers⁹. The author refers to the bestowal of kingship to Bahlul by a majzub when he was a young man. Nizam-ud-Din Ahmad recorded in his *Tabaqat-i-Akbari* that Bahlul Lodi was adorned not only with personal piety, but was also completely bound in obedience to the laws of the Prophet. In all matters, he followed the path of the law and was very enthusiastic in attending to justice and equality. He passed a great part of his time in the society of the learned and in the company of the faqirs or holy men; and considered it right to show kindness to the poor and the needy. In his *Khulasat-ut-Tawarikh*, Sujan Rai copied from Nizam-ud-Din Ahmad’s account, highlighting Sultan Bahlul’s religiosity and concern for the welfare of his subjects.

Sultan Sikandar Lodi:

“What a wonderful age this is; People are prosperous; there is festival and merrymaking in every house. No one nurses feelings of hatred against another person, nor does anyone entertain the thought of mischief even in his dream.
“

“The king, as possessing divine knowledge, is highly eminent, like a mountain which has the grandeur of the rock externally and the beauty of diamond internally. He is a king like Zulqarnain (Alexandar the great). Therefore, the title of Sikandar has been appropriately given to him.”

- Mushtaqi to close his account of his reign, concludes with following verses of Amir Khusrau¹⁰

Sikandar was the ablest ruler of the Lodi dynasty and one of the great rulers of India, great as a soldier and conqueror, great as an administrator, great as a builder and as a founder¹¹. During the years of his reign, he founded a large

⁶ J.F. Richards, 63

⁷ Ibid 65

⁸ R. Aquil, 122,

⁹ Mushtaqi went on to narrate some anecdotes, which highlight the sultan’s attitude towards the holy men of the realm, He traced the sultan’s devotion towards religion since his childhood, and narrated an incident in which the sultan’s uncle, Islam Khan, had prophesied that the child would bring power and glory to his family.

¹⁰ *Waqiyat-e-Mushtaqi*, xxiii

number of cities and townships. He felt a peculiar delight in evolving new order out of the old, in founding new cities and townships by demolishing old ones or in founding new towns and villages where no habitation existed before.

Mushtaqi's account of the reign of Sultan Sikander is more detailed than that of his father. He was acquainted with many great nobles from whom he got information about the character and social and administrative reforms of Sultan Sikandar. The sultan and his nobles were seriously interested in the progress of agriculture. They encouraged the peasants to bring virgin land under cultivation and they gave them loans whenever they stood in need of financial help. His attitude towards the nobles was also liberal. Charity houses were opened where needy people got financial help. Scholars and poets were patronized and educational institutions were granted financial aid throughout the sultanate. The sultan exhibited great interest in music and appointed Miran Saiyid Ruhullah and Saiyid Ibn Rasul who were nobles well versed in the art of music to interview new musicians for royal service. His reign was marked by general prosperity and affluence. Mushtaqi never attributes supernatural powers to the sultans like the later chroniclers. For him, the Sultan was a thoughtful ruler, keenly interested in the administrative affair of the empire and the wellbeing of his nobles and officers through spies.

The sixteenth-seventeenth century Persian sources lavish equal praise on Sikandar Lodi¹². The sultan's friend and philosopher Jamali hailed his noble qualities including his interest in poetry and devotion towards men of religion. Later, Mushtaqi is both detailed and full of praise, according to him, Sikandar Lodi was a great king devoted to the shariat. He loved justice and was unmatched in bravery and generosity. During his reign people were prosperous. Agriculture and construction activities increased considerably. The traders used to travel in the dominion with a sense of security. The artisans and the peasants had such peace and order in the wilayat that even robbers and highwaymen submitted on their own, became law-abiding and settled down to live peacefully. If anyone turned from the path of obedience, the sultan either got him beheaded or banished from the empire. In every city and territory, Islam prospered considerably and its laws were enforced. Food grains, clothes, cattle and other essential items were cheap. In every city, huge amount of money was disbursed from royal treasury amongst the scholars, learned men, widows and the needy.

Mushtaqi's nephew Abdul Haqq Muhaddis Dehlawi, also praised Sikandar Lodi in his *Tarikh-i-Haqqi* for his piety and to it he seems to attribute the prosperity of his reign. According to him, the king was particularly devoted towards the saints, scholars, and other noble men. Nizam-ud-Din Ahmad suggested that Sikandar Lodi possessed information about the condition of his subjects and soldiers to such a degree that even details of the domestic affairs of the people reached him, so that it was suspected that the ruler had a jinn who was intimate with him, and gave him information of what was to occur in future. In fact, the sources alluded to the sultan's ability to perform miracles.

In the opinion of Raziuddin Aquil Sikandar Lodi's reign is significant in the history of medieval Indian education, mainly because of three steps taken by him. One was an insistence on a certain educational level for all his civil and military officers. Secondly, he substituted Persian for Hindi as the language of the lower administration, for that purpose, schools, were set up which were not attached to the mosques, leading to the secularization of education. Thirdly, in the educational policy of Sikandar Lodi, there was a growing emphasis on rational sciences. He established new schools in several places and invited scholars from other parts of the Muslim world.

Sultan Ibrahim Lodi

A Muslim historian, writing in the seventeenth century, described conditions under the rule of the Lodis, the predecessors of the Mughal as follows¹³:

“One of the most extraordinary phenomena of Sultan Ibrahim's time was that corn, clothes, and every kind of merchandize were cheaper than they had ever been known to be in any other reign”

¹¹ halim, a. (1939). Sikandar lodi as a founder. *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress*, 3, 842–848.

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/44252439>

¹² R. Aquil 122,

¹³ J.F. Richards 47

The Sultan issued an edict that his chiefs and nobles of every degree should take nothing but corn in payment of rent, and no money was to be taken from the cultivators on any account. Later W. H. Moreland, in his work pointed out that the shortage of precious metals may have been a reason for his order that his "chiefs and nobles of every decree should take nothing but corn in payment in rent."

Mushtaqui in his account is critical of the sultan and blames him for maltreating the high nobles of sultan Sikandar's time. He even justifies the rebellions of the nobles against their master, the reason being that many of the nobles whom sultan had destroyed were his patrons.¹⁴

Sur Dynasty:

"With peace and security came prosperity. From his early days ... Sher Shah had given high priority to caring for the peasant. Where the peasant is ruined, the king is ruined, he believed. He therefore took great care to ensure that the protectors of peasants - the army and the revenue officials - did not, as often happened, become their oppressors."

"What is more significant is the fact that despite the overwhelming presence of the dominant Mughals for centuries after, Sher Shah seems to be remembered as the just and ideal ruler."¹⁵ Like Sultan Sikandar Lodi, Sher Shah Sur and Islam Shah Sur impressed Mushtaqui by their sense of justice and interest in the welfare of people.

The Afghan tradition claims that Sher Shah was born to an Afghan wife of Mian Hasan in the reign of Sultan Bahlul, and was named as Farid¹⁶. Farid left home to chart out an independent career for himself. The fresh Jaunpur graduate brimming with self-confidence reportedly lectured his father on the responsibilities of a ruler whose dispensation of justice and punishment prevented the country from plunging into chaos. His views on the ideal society and government where the soldiers and the raiyat were not oppressed, leading to prosperity and expansion of the kingdom, impressed Mian Hasan and he gave him leave to proceed towards the two parganas.

it is assumed that Farid made a tour of the parganas and held meetings with the cultivators, officials, and chiefs, separately or village wise. He fixed the revenue to be paid by the raiyat, to the tune of 1/3rd of the produce. The soldiers and tax-gatherers were warned that if they forced the raiyat to pay more than the agreed share, he would punish them severely. He also directed his father's officers to ensure that the raiyat was protected from the excessive exactions by the zamindars, otherwise collecting taxes from them would be an act of injustice.

P. Saran points out, in telling his father about the oppression of the muqaddams, Farid had displayed his acquaintance with the working of the existing systems of assessment and had decided to reform them. S.C. Misra, suggests that though Sher Shah might have preferred the system of measurement he did not press his choice except in areas where the system could work without much trouble to the cultivator. This delicate balance between the 'regular flow of revenue' and 'prosperity' of the raiyat was ensured by establishing a more aggressive and sophisticated administrative machinery based on the principles of Islamic political theory and experiences of early Islam in India.

Qanungo hails Farid's administration as 'the rule of a strong-willed and well-meaning autocrat sincerely working for the betterment' of the peasantry¹⁷.

The Afghans were defeated at Panipat. According to the late sixteenth century Afghan narrative, their major weakness lay in the fact that they lacked an able leader who could unite the Afghans for a common cause¹⁸. Soon Farid endeared

1. ¹⁴ Mushtaqui, O. O. S. R. U., & Siddiqi, I. H. (1993). *Waqi'at-e-Mushtaqui of Shaikh Rizq Ullah Mushtaqui : a source of information on the life and conditions in the pre-Mughal India.*

¹⁵ R. Aquil, 136

¹⁶ R. Aquil 52

¹⁷ He adds that Farid 'built up a well-knit revenue administration at this time, which was to become the archetype of the revenue system of his empire.

¹⁸ R. Aquil, 57

himself to Bahar Khan, and was rewarded for his capabilities conferred upon Farid the title of Sher Khan and appointed him as the deputy to his son Jalal Khan.

During his stay with the Mughals, Sher Khan came to know of their methods of warfare, their style of governance, and the ways of their nobles. Often in the gatherings of the Afghans, he would talk about his capabilities and intention to expel the Mughals from Hindustan¹⁹. The Afghan leader soon became the uncrowned king of Bihar. Sher Khan's marriage with Lad Malika was followed by another marriage with Hargusain, enabled him to quickly build up a huge army²⁰. Suggesting that the awareness of worldly affairs or knowledge, brings power, Abbas Khan writes that Sher Khan had sent spies all over for obtaining information²¹.

Sher Khan's competence as a military commander is praised by both contemporary and later authorities in superlative terms²². From dismissal as an ambitious Sur bachcha in Babur's camp barely a decade ago to the rise of Sher Shah as the Badshah of Hindustan was a long journey.

Not only the Mughals but the Afghans as well attributed Sher Khan's success to the will of God²³. Popular Muslim cosmology treats kingship as a gift from God. It is believed that Sher Khan received it on account of his piety. Humayun lost because he had devoted himself to wine, women, and opium.

"As regard his justice on this earth, I say that none gives pain even to a creeping ant. Even Nausherwan who has been described as a great judge could not equal Sher Shah in giving right decisions. When he dispenses justice like Umar, the entire world looks up with admiration and praises him. None has the courage to touch even a nose-ring lying (without its mistress); people scatter gold along the road, the cow and the lion move by one path, and the two drink water at one place."

- Malik Muhammad Jai'si in Padmavat²⁴

The sources suggest that his welfare mechanism, personal piety and revenue-free land-grants²⁵ to holy men also made him fit in the image of an ideal ruler. Long passages on statecraft attributed to Sher Shah from the very early days of his career, to be found in Abbas Khan Sarwani's Tarikh-i-Sher Shahi show that the ruler's vision of an ideal government was quite broad-based. It may be that he had imbibed these ideas, as a student at Jaunpur, where he was probably exposed to the early 'mirror for princes' literature²⁶. The passages recorded by Abbas Sarwani and their summarized versions in other texts clearly echo the views of such political theorists as Imam Ghazali and Nizam-ul-Mulk Tusi.

Sher Shah emphasised the need to establish justice as it led to consolidation and expansion of the kingdom, growth of the treasury, and population of villages and towns. On the other hand, tyranny caused destruction of the empire and the ruin of the country, leading to damnation in this world and the next. Thus, prosperity and survival of the kingdom was based on the wellbeing of the raiyat, and that was possible when the nobles stopped committing oppression.

¹⁹ R. Aquil, 61

²⁰ The three hundred mans of gold which she gave to Sher Khan, together with the treasure received from Lad Malika

²¹ Sher Khan knew that Humayun would have to go back soon as he had received information from his spies that Sultan Bahadur of Gujarat had seized Mandu and had resolved to capture Delhi, for which he would set out shortly.

²² "Sher Khan knew all kinds of machinations, deception, duplicity and stratagem which are never treated as forbidden in war and that he knew how to begin the fight and how to conclude it" Abbas Khan in Tarikh-i-Sher Shahi.

²³ R. Aquil, 100

²⁴ The author wrote that even Nausherwan who was described as a great judge could not equal Sher Shah in giving right decisions. The latter's attempt to dispense justice like the caliph Umar was admired by the whole world.

²⁵ madad-i-ma'ash

²⁶ R. Aquil, 125

Further, the suggestion that the affluence of a country depended upon the dispensation of justice and punishment was illustrated through an interesting simile in which the state was referred to as a plant, and the administration as water²⁷. In particular, the focus is on his justice and charity.

It is difficult to get direct evidence of the influence of the early Muslim political theorists on Sher Shah's ideals, even though we know that some of the classical texts were known in the period. Raziuddin Aquil is of the opinion that It may be that the Afghan empire builder evolved his own style of governance on the basis of his long experience as an administrator at various levels.

Similarity in the ideals of governance however, can be drawn from one of the classics already existing with that of Kautilya's Arthashastra. Kautilya defines statecraft as the science of wealth and welfare 'by which territory is acquired and maintained'²⁸ and also as the science of upholding the social order by just punishment. The treasury is the state's means for achieving both dharma and kama. 'From the treasury comes state power. With the treasury and the army the earth is acquired with the treasury as the ornament'. However, the treasury and the army, as well as fortified cities 'all depend on the people'. Therefore, it follows that the promotion of the people's prosperity is the king's duty. Arthashastra contains not only a rationalized system of fines and punishments in great detail but also extensive rules for diplomacy, warfare, systematic employment of spies, techniques of deceit and treachery and devices for sowing dissension among cohesive domestic groups as well as external enemies.

P. Saran writes that Sher Shah consolidated his government by making his provincial governors realise that they were liable to punishment for the least violation of the statutes and that they had no claims to any particular iqta or jagir²⁹. William Erskine suggested that many of Sher Shah's revenue regulations were retained or renewed by Akbar, and seemed to have been incorporated into Todarmal's system of finance. J.F. Richards notes that during 'that brief period his energetic administration forecast many of the centralizing measures in revenue assessment and military organization that would be carried to completion by the Mughals'.

It is stated that his administrative measures wiped off poverty from the realm as he spent a lot in charity, and was always concerned about the wellbeing of the people. In order to check the occurrence of famine, Sher Shah had arranged for state-stores of grain from where it could be sent to famine-stricken areas. He built rest-houses for the poor and public-kitchen was started where food was available for them all the time. The royal kitchen was also open to the public. The sources also note that peace and order reigned supreme in Sher Shah's reign. The muqaddam or the village chief was responsible for any crime in the area. If it occurred anywhere, the head of the village concerned was arrested.

Sher Shah also issued orders to his amils or revenue and administrative officials to give out good treatment to the travellers and merchants and ensure that they were protected from the ravages of the thieves and dacoits. The construction of roads with posts and inns, coupled with the rules concerning highway-robbery, should be viewed not merely as aspects of public welfare, but as measures clearly designed to ensure the state's control of the regions. The highways could facilitate rapid movement of the army for campaigns in the regions as part of the imperialistic project. Further, the attempt to maintain law and order on the roads ensured increased trade and commerce in the dominion.

In a very short period, he brought the country under his control, restored peace and order on the road, provided an efficient government and gave to the peasantry and soldiers peace and tranquility. Badauni, goes on to celebrate his good fortune of having been born in the blessed reign of so just a sovereign as Sher Shah. Mushtaqi, a non-Afghan, gives a similar report. Details given by Jaisi in his vernacular text Padmavat, can help us understand the ruler's image in his own time. Mushtaqi suggest that the kings possessed miraculous powers³⁰.

²⁷ Hence it was obligatory to keep the roots of the tree of the kingdom alive with the water of justice and chastisement so that the people could enjoy the fruits of peace and order. sixteenth century writers extol Sher Shah's methods of administration and public works.

²⁸ Arjomand, S. A. (2001). Perso-Indian Statecraft, Greek Political Science and the Muslim Idea of Government International Sociology, 16(3), 455-473.

²⁹ R. Aquil 129

³⁰ Anecdote of the ability of Sher Shah of performing miracles is supplemented by the frequent suggestion that the monarch was a representative of God on earth

The image of the philanthropic monarch and a thaumaturgic Sufi is subsumed in the personality of the king as his tomb is taken as a shrine, called the 'roja' in local parlance, which people frequent to seek blessings and benedictions, and place ritual Sufic chadar on the grave. Hermann Goetz feels that Sasaram, "for Sher Shah was the very symbol of his life and glory," and thus he chose it for the site for his tomb.³¹

The architectural movement has been referred to Sher Shah as, there are these ideals as they materialized under his patronage, i.e., the buildings of his period, of special significance is the effect these buildings had on the style that followed that is to say, their influence on the subsequent architectural development of the Mughals³².

The Sultan in 'Abbas's narrative is a synthesis of several roles. He is the patriarch of the Afghans, the symbol of their unity resurgence and hope; without him, the Afghans lose not only their heritage but also their self-respect. He is also a charismatic leader, an astute and shrewd general, an experienced ruler of men³³. "Adal or justice at the centre of his value structure, as the keystone of policy making. Justice builds up a kingdom; oppression ruins it. Good government is the basis of religion and faith; should water the garden of justice with the water of government."³⁴ Government is the source of the protection of women and children of the subjects from the oppression of tyrant and is the root of safety from the tyranny of the official." The raiyat had thus to be protected from the depredations of both the nobility and the functionaries. "The raiyat are innocent", Sher Shah is reported to have said, "They submit to those who are in power. If I oppress them, they will desert the land and the kingdom will be ruined and it will be a long time before the country is repopulated."

CONCLUSION:

*"The Sultan combined in himself the qualities of a philanthropic ruler and a thaumaturgic Sufi"*³⁵

Raziuddin

Aquil

The details of governance recorded by the medieval authorities point to a kind of 'welfare monarchy' in the period. Sixteenth century accounts have portrayed the Afghan kings as ideal rulers, whose welfare mechanism, personal piety and madad-i-maash grants to holy-men were much celebrated.

Malik Muhammad Jaisi's eulogy for the rule of Sher Shah, particularly for his munificence, generosity and concern for justice is crucial for our understanding. As noted by Raziuddin Aquil, these accounts cannot be dismissed as mere imaginations of the Afghan historians, for the non-Afghan writers have also presented largely the same picture of the period. It may be said that they were influenced by the progress made under the Mughal emperor Akbar, but were yet in search of an ideal ruler. We noticed that public weal was an important feature of the Afghan political discourse³⁶.

The rulers were sensitive to the aspirations of the people and kept in touch with the general social conditions through charitable endeavours, in particular in times of drought and scarcity³⁷. Significantly, the Sufis of the period attribute supernatural power to their contemporary monarchs. We noticed several anecdotes bearing on the miraculous power of the Afghan rulers. In a curious inversion of roles, a leading Sufi of the period chose to address the king as 'shaykh'.

³¹ Catherine B.Asher the Mausoleum of Sher Shah Sur

³² Percy Brown_638,

³³ Sher Shah Suri Misra, S. C. (1977). ABBAS KHAN SARWANI AND HIS TARIKH-I-SHER SHAHI : SOME UNDERLYING CONCEPTS.

³⁴ Misra, S. C. (1977). ABBAS KHAN SARWANI AND HIS TARIKH-I-SHER SHAHI : SOME UNDERLYING CONCEPTS. Proceedings of the Indian History Congress, 38, 231–238. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44139075>

³⁵ ibid

³⁶ R. Aquil, 226

³⁷ In this connection, reference may be made to the arrangement of public kitchen by the king, a social service which was particularly associated with the Sufi establishments.

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