

Islamic Symbols of Authority: The Quran and Hadith in Delhi Sultanate's Political Legitimacy (13th–14th Centuries)

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Abstract

This paper analyses two major sources of Islamic law utilised as symbols of authority by the Sultans of Delhi during the 13th and 14th centuries in the Indian sub-continent. It focuses on how the Sultans of Delhi sought to reinforce their power and sovereignty through Quranic verses and *ahadis* (pl. of *hadis*). Exploring how these two symbols were used, this study examines how these symbols were propagated through multiple mediums to legitimise kingship and authority. This study perceives religious symbols important for sustaining the Delhi Sultan's rule, which was projected as divinely sanctioned. The research investigates the role of these symbols in establishing their link with the Islamic past, history, culture and tradition. Discussing the relationship between symbols and authority, this paper explores how the Delhi Sultans used religious symbols to not only establish their political supremacy and authority but also consolidate the allegiance of the Muslim community.

Keywords: symbiosis, Quran, Hadis, legitimacy.

Introduction

Throughout the medieval period, the legitimisation of kingship and authority was a concern for Muslim rulers. In the Sultanate period (13th -14th centuries), the Sultans of Delhi sought to reinforce their power and sovereignty through various means, including Quranic verses, *ahadis* (pl. of *hadis*), narratives of pre-Islamic prophets, the legacies of Prophet Muhammad, the Caliphs, Sufis, and past Muslim rulers, *shariah*, justice, exalted titles, and monumental structures. This paper examines the role of two major symbols drawn from Quranic verses and *ahadis* (pl. of *hadis*). These symbols were propagated through multiple mediums, such as chronicles, royal *farmans*, inscriptions, *khutbas*, *fathnamas* and coins. All these mediums were standard modes of circulating ideas and political authority of Sultans. These symbols not only established their link with their Islamic past, history, culture and tradition but also portrayed them as legitimate rulers in the eyes of their co-religionists. Through these symbols, the Sultans of Delhi not just established their political supremacy and authority but also consolidated the allegiance of the Muslim community under his rule.

The relationship between state and religion under the Khaljis and Tughluqs reveals that political pragmatism and religious ideology were interconnected nodes. In the Delhi Sultanate, religion served as an ideological instrument that legitimated and sustained political authority. As a rhetoric, the Islamic political theory had absorbed the Sasanian maxim, "religion and state are twins" (*al-din wal-daulat tawaman*) or (*al-din wal-mulk tawaman*), in the attempt to reconcile sovereign authority with the tenets

of the *shariah*. The Sasanian maxim was widely adopted by Muslim historiographical traditions, becoming integral to the medieval theory of statecraft across the Eastern Islamic World.¹ Becoming a foundational element in the medieval theory of state, medieval scholars and political thinkers invoked this maxim under various contexts.² In the context of the Delhi Sultanate, numerous references to this maxim are found scattered throughout the historiographical sources of the period. For instance, Hasan Nizami uses a variation of this maxim in his writings, stating that “the continuation of the customs of religion and the establishment of the regulations of the kingdom are twins” (*istimrar-i marasim-i din wa istiqrar-i qawaid-i mulk tawaman and*). He reinforces this idea through a *hadis*: “Religion is the foundation and kingship is its guardian; that which lacks a foundation will be destroyed, and that which lacks a guardian will be lost.”³ Nizami’s rhetorical framework perceived interdependence between religious norms and political authority in the Sultanate’s ideological structure. Similarly, Ziya Barani, in his *Fatawa-i Jahandari*, seeks to reconcile the domains of religion and governance, particularly the executive and judicial aspects of political authority. He employs phrases such as “religion and kingship are twins” (*al-din wal-mulk tawaman*)⁴ and “religion and justice are twins” (*al-din wal-adl tawaman*),⁵ representing the ideological framework that viewed political power and religious legitimacy interdependent. Notably, this propagation of interdependence between religion and governance was not confined to Muslim intellectuals. It was also propagated by the Sultans of Delhi. The Sultans often adopted the honorific title, “world and religion” (*dunya wa din*),⁶ and propagated the same *ahadis*,

¹ “Religion and kingship are two brothers, and neither can dispense with the other. Religion is the foundation of kingship, and kingship protects religion. For whatever lacks a foundation must perish, and whatever lacks a protector disappears”. R. C. Zaehner, *The Dawn and Twilight of Zoroastrianism*, London, 1961, p. 284. Also the statement in the *Tansar-nama* that “religion and kingship are brothers” Ibn Isfandiyar, *Tarikh-i Tabaristan*, ed. Abbas Iqbal, Tehran, n. d., p. 17, cited in A. K. S. Lambton, ‘Justice in the Medieval Persian Theory of Kingship’, *Studia Islamica*, No. 17, 1962, p. 96.

² Husayn Vaiz Kashaifi justifies kingship in the following “This law was a divine law inspired by God and the prophet; and when the prophet instituted a law and regulation, someone was needed to maintain that law by his power and dignity, and to prevent anyone transgressing its limits; this person is called the king. Thus the rank of kingship is the rank of prophethood, because the prophet is the founder of the *shariah* and the king its defender and protector. Hence it is said 'kingship and religion are twins'. And therefore God most high enjoined obedience to kings and sultans after obedience to himself and his Prophet, saying 'Obey God, and obey the prophet, and those who enjoy authority among you'. Consequently the king must be endowed with the characteristics of him who brought the *shariah* so that he can guard the limits of the holy law according to the conditions laid down therein”. Husayn Vaiz Kashifi, *Akhlaq-i Muhsini*, ed. Aqa Mirza Ibrahim Tanjir Shirazi, Bombay, lith., pp. 7-8, cited in A. K. S. Lambton, ‘Justice in Medieval Persian’, p. 116; Firdausi, *Shah Nama*, vol. VII, ed. Said Nafisi, Teheran, 1935, p. 1995; Fakhr al din al-Razi, *Jami-ul ulum*, lith. Bombay, 1323/1006, p. 219; Nizamul Mulk, *Siyasat Nama*, ed. C. Sobefer, Paris, 1891-93, p. 65; Nizam-i Aruzi, *Chahar Maqala*, ed. Mirza Muhammad, London, 1910, p. 55; Nasir al-din Tusi, *Ahkaq-i Nasiri*, lith. Lahore, 1865, p. 167. See also, R. Levy, *An Introduction to the Sociology of Islam*, vol. I, London, 1931, p. 304; I. Goldziher, *Streitschrift des Gazali gegen die Batinijja Sekte*, Leiden, 1910, p. 102, cited by Peter Hardy, *Historians of Medieval India: Studies in Indo-Muslims Historical Writing*. Luzac, London, 1960, p. 25, N.3; “if religion was the base, *dawlat* (temporal power) was its guardian and charged with its preservation”. H. Laoust, *La politique de Ġazali*, Paris, 1970, pp. 73-74, cited in Ann. K. S. Lambton, *State and Government in Medieval Islam*, p. 108; Al-Ghazali, *Nasihah al-muluk*, ed. Jalal Humai & H. D. Issacs, tr. F. R. C. Bagley as *Ghazali’s Book of Counsel for Kings*, Oxford University Press, London, 1964, pp. 56, 59.

³ Hasan Nizami, *Taj-ul Maasir*, ed. Syed Amir Hasan Abidi, Centre of Persian Research Office of the Cultural Counsellor Islamic Republic of Iran, New Delhi, 2008, p. 34.

⁴ Barani in *Fatawa* expresses that God has delegated power in this world to a partnership between prophets and kings, the descendants respectively of Shis and Kaimurs, the sons of Adam. “Indeed religion and kingship are twins, meaning that master of religion and the master of the state are originally twin brother”. Barani, *Fatawa-i Jahandari*, ed. Afsar Salim Khan, Research Society of Pakistan, Lahore, 1972, pp. 333-334, 340-41.

⁵ Barani, *Fatawa-i Jahandari*, p. 66.

⁶ Like, *Jalalud dunya wa din*, *Ruknud dunya wa din*, *Alaud dunya wa din*, *Shihab dunya wa din*, *Qutbud dunya wa din*, *shamsud dunya wa din*, *Nasirud dunya wa din* and *Ghiyasud dunya wa din*. See H. Nelson Wright, *The Coinage and Metrology of the Sultans of Delhi*, Manager of Publications, Delhi, 1936, pp. 83, 87, 88, 95, 96, 103, 111.

highlighting the Islamic ideals that harmonised spiritual and temporal realms. For the Sultans, the honorific title and the propagation of the *ahadis* were rhetorical devices that affirmed their claims to religious and political supremacy. Even though the Sultanate's political discourse aligned with Islamic ideals, its governance often reflected a pragmatic and syncretic approach, informed by the socio-political reality of a diverse and multi-religious society.

Generally, religious symbols were employed by Sultans to bolster and legitimise their rule. For this purpose, they made use of Quranic verses and prophetic imagery. It enhanced their grandeur and sanctity, resonating with the religious sentiments of their audience and reinforcing their legitimacy through revered narratives. Historians of the Delhi Sultanate often incorporated Quranic verses in their historiography through direct quotation, illustration, and allusion. For instance, the Quranic verse "Obey God, obey the Prophet, and those with authority among you" (*atiullah wa atiurrasul wa ulul amr minkum*)⁷ was extensively used as a means to legitimise the political authority of Sultans. This verse was of crucial importance to Muslim advice literature and history. Scholars like Ghazali, Fakhr-i Mudabbir, Barani, Amir Khusrau, Ain-ul Mulk, and Afif utilized this verse to similar effect.⁸ Sultans were often regarded as a shadow of God (*zill Allah*), representative, or deputy of God (*naibi khuda*) on earth, with subjects expected to submit to their divinely ordained authority. In connection with this particular verse, the actions of Sultans were further legitimised in the entire sphere. For example, the Quranic verse, "We give you clear authority over such people"⁹ and "verily We gave you victory"¹⁰ was also extensively quoted to establish the legitimacy of Sultans and his capacity to decree law on the basis of his own authority recognized by God.

The concept of divinely sanctioned kingship was further legitimised by the purported *ahadis*. Note a famous *hadis* of medieval period: "The Caliphate after me will be thirty years and after that the age of kings".¹¹ This *hadis* was used to connect the Sultan to a chain of authority that extended from the Prophet through the Caliphs to Sultans. Like the Quranic verse, obedience to the authority of Sultans was also established with *ahadis*. For example, Sultan Muhammad bin Tughluq, besides the same Quranic verse, invoked obedience also through a *hadis*: "one who obeys the Sultan, obeys the supreme Benevolent" (*man atae al-Sultan faqad atae al-Rahman*) and "If there were no Sultan, verily the people would devour one another".¹² Although the authenticity of these *ahadis* is not established, they were historically and culturally relevant. These *ahadis* were used to justify the obedience of subjects, contributing to the political ideology that legitimated the authority of the Delhi Sultans.

⁷ *Quran*, Chapter 4:Verse 59.

⁸ A. K. S. Lambton, 'The Theory of Kingship in the *Naṣīḥat-ul Muluk* of Ghazali,' *Islamic Quarterly*, Vol.1, 1954, pp. 51–2; Fakhr-i Mudabbir, *Tarikh-i Fakhruddin Mubarakshah being The Historical Introduction to the Book of Genealogies of Fakhruddin Mubarakshah Marvar-rudi completed in A.D. 1206*, ed. E. Denison Ross, Royal Asiatic Society, London, 1927, p. 12; Fakhr-i Mudabbir, *Adab-ul Harb wa Shujaat*, ed. Ahmad Suhayli Khvansari, Intisharat-i Iqbal, Tehran, 1967, p. 5; Amir Khusrau, *Nuh Sipihir*, ed. Mohammad Wahid Mirza, Baptist Mission Press, Calcutta, 1948, p. 227; Barani, *Fatawa-i Jahandari*, p. 280; Ain-ul Mulk Mahru, *Insha-i Mahru*, ed. Sheikh Abdur Rashid, Lahore, 1965, pp. 2, 25, 186; Afif, *Tarikh-i Firuzshahi*, ed. Maulavi Vilayat Husain, Asiatic Society, Calcutta, 1891, p. 23.

⁹ Amir Khusrau, *Khazain-ul Futuh*, ed. Mohammad Wahid Mirza, Asiatic Society, Calcutta, 1953, p. 13; The full extract is 'If they (the non-Muslims) withdraw from you and do not fight you and offer you peace, then Allah has not given you a way against them.. If they do not withdraw from you and (do not) offer you peace and restrain their hands, then seize them and kill them wherever you find them and against these we have given you a clear authority. *Quran*, Chapter 4:Verse 90.

¹⁰ *Quran*, Chapter 48:Verse 1.

¹¹ Barani, *Tarikh*, ed. Sayid Ahmad Khan, Asiatic Society of Bengal, Calcutta, 1862, p. 8.

¹² H. Nelson Wright, *The Coinage and Metrology of the Sultans of Delhi*, p. 143; Fakhr-i Mudabbir, *Tarikh-i Fakhruddin Mubarakshah*, pp. 12-13.

Conclusion

Though often at odds with orthodox Islamic values, the concept of kingship was gradually Islamised and legitimised by Muslim intellectuals in response to changing circumstances and the demands of political expediency. The sovereign authority of the Sultans, drawn from two major and sacred symbols of authority (Quranic verses and *ahadis*) became a legitimate form of kingship. This kingship was sanctioned by divine authority to the selected ones for both temporal and spiritual affairs. Ideologically or practically, these symbols allowed Sultans to navigate relationships with their co-religionists within the Sultanate and the Islamic world.