



International Journal of Recent Development in Engineering and Technology
Website: www.ijrdet.com (ISSN 2347-6435 (Online) Volume 15, Issue 06, June 2026)

The Judicial and Administrative Framework of the Delhi Sultanate: A Historical Study

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Abstract-- The Delhi Sultanate is one of the most important stages in the political and administrative history of India during medieval times. This period saw the emergence of many new institutions of governance, laws, and administration that had long lasting effects in shaping up the Indian sub-continent. The present paper aims at highlighting the judicial and administrative system of the Delhi Sultanate by focusing on the efforts made by the rulers, particularly Sultan Qutbuddin Aibak and Sultan Iltutmish. The study will focus on the following aspects of governance in medieval Delhi: judicial system, structure of the courts, judicial officials, provincial administration, revenue collection, etc. The rulers of the Delhi Sultanate established a strong framework of governance which not only created law and order but also helped in strengthening their political authority. Although the judicial systems faced difficulties due to political instability and conflicts, yet they played an important part in shaping the future administration of the Mughal era. The judicial institutions of the Sultanate contributed significantly to the evolution of governance in medieval India

Keywords-- Delhi Sultanate, Judicial Administration, Medieval India, Islamic Law, Governance, Qazi, Iltutmish, Qutbuddin Aibak

I. INTRODUCTION

The setting up of the Delhi Sultanate in the early thirteenth century was another important stage in the history of India. The entry of the Turkish governors to the Indian subcontinent led to the emergence of a centralized political system with a set of novel institutions. The Delhi Sultanate came into being following the collapse of the regional states and the military conquests of Muhammad Ghori, which laid the foundation for the ascendance of his loyal subordinate, Qutbuddin Aibak. The kings of the Delhi Sultanate were fully aware of the fact that merely being militarily powerful was not sufficient for their survival. They needed an effective administrative and judicial system in order to be successful. As a result, the Sultans formed courts, selected judges, and established legal systems which were mostly based on Islamic law. Importantly, the history of the Delhi Sultanate is not confined to the successful military campaigns of its rulers.

Their political institutions played an important role in shaping the political system of medieval India and the politics of successive dynasties. This research attempts to analyze the judicial and administrative system of the Delhi Sultanate and its impact on governance in India.

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

A considerable body of scholarship has dealt with the political and military history of the Delhi Sultanate. At the same time, growing interest is being shown regarding the administrative and legal framework of the Sultanate period. It has been claimed that Islamic law was applied creatively to suit Indian conditions without neglecting local customs and laws. Recent literature on the governance of medieval India indicates that the Delhi Sultans possessed an elaborate administrative apparatus based on an array of trained administrators, judges, commanders, and revenue collectors. Studies on judicial administration indicate that courts worked at various levels, and legal officials played an important role in dispensing justice. Qutbuddin Aibak and Iltutmish have received special attention due to their vital contributions to political stabilization. Iltutmish, in particular, is considered by modern historians as the real founder of the Delhi Sultanate as he laid the foundations of sound administration in India. Modern historians generally regard Iltutmish as the true architect of the Delhi Sultanate because of his administrative reforms and efforts to stabilize the state.

III. METHODOLOGY

This study is based on a qualitative historical approach. It relies primarily on secondary sources, including scholarly books, journal articles, and historical studies concerning the Delhi Sultanate. The research adopts an analytical method to examine the judicial and administrative institutions established by the Sultans and evaluates their significance in the broader context of medieval Indian governance.

Historical Background of the Delhi Sultanate

The Delhi Sultanate was formed in 1206 CE after the death of Muhammad Ghori.



It was initiated by Qutbuddin Aibak, who was a former slave and rose to power because of his merits as an administrator and soldier, making him the first independent Sultan of Delhi. This signified the start of a new political era in northern India. Various dynasties controlled the Sultanate during its rule, which included the Slave Dynasty, the Khilji Dynasty, the Tughluq Dynasty, the Sayyid Dynasty, and the Lodi Dynasty. Together, these dynasties ruled over extensive regions of the subcontinent for more than three centuries. Qutbuddin Aibak and Iltutmish were among the key figures in the establishment of governance. While the former set the groundwork for politics, the latter developed and extended the empire.

Judicial Administration under Qutbuddin Aibak

Qutbuddin Aibak's reign was relatively short, yet his contribution to state-building was substantial. As the founder of the Delhi Sultanate, he faced the challenge of maintaining control over newly conquered territories while establishing a legitimate government. Aibak emphasized the importance of justice and public order. He appointed capable officials to administer different regions and ensured that disputes were resolved through recognized legal procedures. His administration sought to create confidence among the population by promoting stability and reducing internal conflicts. The legal system under Aibak was influenced by Islamic principles, which provided the basis for judicial decision-making. Judges were appointed to hear cases, interpret legal rules, and enforce judgments. Although the Sultan remained the supreme authority, judicial functions were delegated to qualified officials who exercised considerable responsibility.

Judicial Reforms under Sultan Iltutmish

Indeed, it is fair to say that Iltutmish was one of the greatest rulers of the Delhi Sultanate. Having taken the throne in 1211 CE, he managed to overcome political challenges and consolidate his governmental institutions. First and foremost, his contribution was linked to the improvement of judicial administration. He was aware that only justice could ensure political stability and the trust of the population. According to historical tradition, he was the ruler who gave much attention to justice issues and promoted quick conflict resolution. Iltutmish appointed skilled judges and highlighted the significance of honesty, integrity, and impartiality in resolving disputes. He made sure that the staff of his judicial institution worked well and did not involve themselves in any corrupt activities. Thus, thanks to Iltutmish, the judicial administration turned into an organized and efficient institution.

Court System and Judicial Hierarchy

The Judicial system of the Delhi Sultanate comprised a hierarchical arrangement. The Sultan at the top occupied the most significant position in terms of being the highest judicial authority and the court of final appeal. There were various significant courts functioning within the central administration of the Sultanate. Civil cases, criminal cases, religious cases, and administrative cases came up before these courts. These courts were supervised by judicial officers to ensure that justice was being served according to the set norms and principles within them. The role played by the Chief Qazi in the hierarchy of the judicial system was vital. Being the head of the judicial system of the Delhi Sultanate, he was responsible for supervising all the judges and advising the Sultan on any legal matter. Muftis offered their expert opinion to solve any difficult legal issue faced by the judges.

Provincial and Local Administration

The Delhi Sultanate established an elaborate system of administration ranging from the central government down to the village level. The empire comprised of several provinces, districts, and local administrative units. The provinces had governors who represented the power of the Sultan. They were mandated to ensure law and order, supervise revenue, and coordinate various administrative matters. They also performed some judicial roles, together with provincial judges. In the districts, there were administrators who were in charge of local and judicial matters. District judges adjudicated civil and criminal cases in accordance with the law while others oversaw policing, revenue and general administration. Autonomy was granted to villages through local councils that solved small conflicts and took care of village affairs.

Revenue and Taxation System

A good revenue collection system was imperative for the smooth running of the Delhi Sultanate. The economy of the Delhi Sultanate depended heavily on the agriculture sector, from which taxation was made on the output. Records of the agricultural output were kept by the revenue officials, and taxes were charged according to the set laws. This revenue helped pay for military campaigns, administration costs, building infrastructure, and other government activities. Trade and commerce were also controlled by the state in order to provide fairness in business transactions. This provided economic stability to the Delhi Sultanate and improved its governance capabilities.



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Influence of Islamic and Abbasid Traditions

The judicial and administrative institutions of the Delhi Sultanate were strongly influenced by Islamic political traditions. Many aspects of governance reflected ideas that had developed in earlier Islamic empires, particularly the Abbasid Caliphate. The adoption of Islamic legal principles provided a coherent framework for judicial administration. Judges, legal scholars, and religious officials played important roles in interpreting and applying the law. These institutions helped establish legitimacy and promote social order. However, the Delhi Sultans did not simply replicate foreign models. They adapted administrative practices to local conditions and incorporated elements that reflected the realities of Indian society. This combination of external influence and local adaptation contributed to the durability of the Sultanate's institutions.

Major Features of the Judicial System

There are some features that characterized the judicial system during the Delhi Sultanate period.

In the first place, the dispensation of justice was one of the basic duties of the state. Rulers saw this as a requirement for stability in the political sphere as well as overall welfare of their subjects.

Secondly, the judiciary enjoyed a level of independence. The Sultan was the highest authority; however, judges did not perform their duties under his direct supervision.

Thirdly, the system of courts was based on a hierarchy to ensure that legal issues were settled by the appropriate organs of power.

Fourthly, legal specialists like Qazis and Muftis had an important part in explaining the law to the officials of the state.

Lastly, customs of each community were taken into account when necessary.

IV. DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

The administrative and judicial system of the Delhi Sultanate was indeed a remarkable accomplishment for medieval statehood. As the rulers understood well that power needs institutional backing, they worked on the development of various institutions.

In this respect, it should be noted that the times of Qutbuddin Aibak and Iltutmish were quite crucial, since these monarchs laid down the groundwork for a more efficient system of governance. It was owing to the rulers' efforts aimed at justice and accountability that the Sultanate became a well-established state. Moreover, one can notice the interrelation between the Indian society and the Muslim religion in the Sultanate's legal system. While the Islamic law was the main source of the legal system, the Sultanate's administration was highly flexible and capable of accommodating local conditions.

V. CONCLUSION

The Delhi Sultanate is a significant part of the history of governance in India. Thanks to the activities of kings like Qutbuddin Aibak and Iltutmish, a highly advanced judicial and administrative system was established that contributed to political stability. The Sultanate created a highly advanced system of judicial hierarchy, improved provincial administration, facilitated revenue collection, and encouraged obedience to law. Such institutions incorporated both Islamic politics as well as the needs of Indian society. The effects of the rule of the Delhi Sultanate have been felt long after its rule. The contributions made by it have influenced other systems of governance and helped develop legal-political institutions in India. Therefore, studying the system of the Delhi Sultanate is of considerable historical importance.

Acknowledgment

The researcher expresses thanks to all scholars, writers, librarians, publishers, books, journals, online resources, and research papers that helped in completing this study. Their valuable knowledge and guidance made this research possible.

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