Ottoman-Mughal Political Relations circa 1500-1923

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Keywords: Central Asia, Ottoman, Turkey, Mughal, Muslim, Hindu, India, Khilafat,

Introduction

The early modern world saw developments in the power of the emergence of Muslim empires that replaced the fragmented tribal alliances and minor Sultanates. These great empires namely the Ottomans, Safavids, the Uzbeks and the Mughals all shared Central Asian Turkic political traditions apart from Persian aesthetic understandings and a vision of conquest rooted in Mongol aspirations of a world empire.¹

Modern day historians tend to treat all Islamic civilizations as discrete entities in terms of their colonial heritages and European style nation-state analysis. These civilizations are as a matter of routine conceptualised according to their dynastic character and political character. But in reality cultural contacts between Central Asia, Iran and India have always transcended political realities. The sub-continent has been connected to the world system since pre-historic times primarily via the mountain passes over the Hindu Kush to the North West.²

Successive Muslim dynasties to rule over parts of the sub-continent all came from the northwest and were mainly either Persianized Central Asian Turks or Turkified Pakhtuns all coming from the direction of what is now Afghanistan. These successive waves of Muslim conquerors all brought with them elements of Central Asian and Persian culture which they added to the ever evolving mix of South Asian society.

It should be however emphasized that it was under the Mughals that this steady process of cultural amalgamation between Central Asia and South Asia reached its peak and in many ways showed a happy synthesis. The magnificent cultural achievements in the form of breath-taking architecture took place entirely on Indian soil as the Mughals along with their Central Asian political, administrative and military influences also brought painting and architectural styles. The famous Taj Mahal as we all know was directly inspired by Timur's tomb in Samarqand. Never were the lines of communication and interaction more open between Central and South Asia than they were under the Mughals.

The same can be said for the channels leading from Iran and even the Mediterranean world of the Ottomans. Part one of this paper will study the historical relationship between the Turkic-Asian Mughals and the Eurasian Ottomans with a focus upon the political story. The second part of the paper will investigate the relations between the Muslim Indians and the Ottomans.

¹ In my soon to be published article Ashraf Razi ‘Turkey-Pakistan Political Relations: Some Observations’ available in The Eurasia Studies Society Journal, 2013, I will explore the relationship between the modern countries of Turkey and Pakistan, the heirs to the Ottoman and Mughal Dynasties respectively.
Part One: The Mughal-Ottoman Political Relationship

The Mughals were the principal inheritors of the Central-Asian Turco-Persian legacy of Timur: ‘true Timurids who enthusiastically embraced Timurid legitimacy and consciously presided over Timurid renaissance Indian sub-continent’

So although Arab traders had been in touch with the Indian sub-continent for quite some time ever since the conquest of Sind by Mohammed bin Qassem in (712AD) some historians regard this part of history as a mere episode in the history of the sub-continent as it affected only a small portion of the vast sub-continent. It would be however a denial of fact to say that the Arab conquest of Sind had no lasting effect on India. The conquest introduced Islam to the Indian sub-continent. But we must not fail however to add here that the permanent conquest of India was later achieved only by the Turks from the north. The Muslim religion and the Persian language and the literary tradition united Turks, Iranians, Afghans and others for nearly a millennium.

Mughal-Ottoman relationship.

According to Prof. Naimur Rahman Farooqi the study of this fascinating subject was not given proper scholarly attention it deserved. The situation is no better in Ottoman historiography either he goes on to say. Professor Karpat’s research applies especially to the Ottoman relationship to the contemporary Muslim states. Hikmet Bayur’s Hindusthan Tarihi (two volumes, Ankara 1947-50) has devoted only a few cursory remarks to Ottoman-Mughal relations. Likewise Indian historians like R.C Verma have devoted only perfunctory remarks on this great subject.

The year 1556 marks the beginning of the diplomatic relationship between the Mughal and the Ottoman States when Emperor Humayun (1530-1556) wrote his first and his last letter to the Ottoman Sultan. The year 1748 on the other hand marks the termination of Mughal-Ottoman relations. It was in this year that the last Ottoman embassy to the Mughal court left Shahjehanabad, the Mughal capital on its homeward journey to Istanbul. After 1748 there is no record of any exchange of diplomatic missions between the two sides although cultural contacts continued in the form of letters from minor rulers of India till the abolition of Khilafat 1920. So this shared legacy of Mughal-Ottoman relationship has to be understood before we actually discuss Turkish-Pakistan relationship.

The Ottoman influence had preceded the Mughals in India particularly in the Deccan in the south and along with the western coast of the sub-continent. Ottoman adventurers and soldiers of fortune abounded in India. They were reputed to be expert gunners and musketeers and were generally employed as artillery men. Several Ottoman Turks held positions of power and considerable influence in the Sultanate of Gujarat (parts of both are in India and Pakistan). Names like Rumi Khan and Rajab Khudawand Khan are still famous in

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the sub-continent. Rajab Khan became the governor of Surat a city in Gujarat. According to Turkish historian Farishte it was Rajab Khan who built the castle of Surat fortifying it in the Turkish architectural fashion. The rousing reception that Sidi al Reis the Ottoman admiral received in Gujarat bear witness to the strong position and influence enjoyed by the Ottoman Turks in this Muslim state of the sub-continent.

**Mughal attitude towards the Ottoman Khilafat.**

There was a tremendous respect for the Ottoman Khilafat. Letters written to the Emperor especially during the reign of Humayun to ‘Suleiman the Magnificent’ bears testimony to this fact:

‘Gifts of sincere wishes to your exalted majesty the possessor of the dignity of Khilafat, the pole of the sky of greatness and fortune, the consolidator of the foundations of Islam. Your name is engraved on the seal of greatness and in your time the Khilafat has been carried to perfection. May your Khilafat be perpetuated. God be praised that the gates of victory are opened by the eyes of His inspiration and His dispensation the seat of the Sultanate and the throne of the Khilafat of the realms of Hind and Sind is once again graced by a monarch (Humayun) whose magnificence is equal to that of Sultan Suleiman the magnificent.’

The Ottoman grand vizier Mustafa Pasha was greeted most respectfully by the grand Mughal Vizier accompanied with pomp and splendour. The Turkish ambassador Arsalan Agha was given a pompous and distinguished reception by Mir Zafar of Mughal India when he visited Emperor Shah Jehan in Kashmir. However Mughal attitude towards the Ottomans varied from emperor to emperor. It was a phase of mostly cordiality with occasional outbursts of spasmodic hostility.

Babur the first Mughal was steeped in Turkish culture. He spoke and wrote beautiful Turkish (Chagtai). His famous Baburnama is well known universally. The Emperor also admired and utilized Ottoman military tactics and methods. Yet he remained indifferent towards the Ottomans the reason being his dislike of Ottoman- Uzbek friendship that he considered damaging to his aims and interests in Central Asia. Babur’s successor Humayun exhibited great respect for the Ottoman Sultan as the only sovereign in the world worthy to bear the title of Padshah and displayed a genuine desire to establish contacts with the Ottomans on a permanent basis.

Akbar who followed Humayun not only reversed this policy but even demonstrated outright hostility towards the Ottomans. It has been suggested that Akbar’s policy was based on real politik according to Pakistani Scholar Riazul Islam. He goes on to say Akbar revealed a lack of political pragmatism and diplomatic acumen as far as the Ottomans were concerned. Historians say Akbar missed a great opportunity of a joint Mughal-Ottoman operation against the Portuguese whom he wanted to encounter. It could have curtailed if not ended the Portuguese behaviour towards the Indian commerce and Haj traffic.

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5 Ibid.
6 Riazul Islam, Indo-Persia Relations: A Study of the Political and Diplomatic Relations between the Mughal Empire and Iran, Tehran, 1970, p.82.
7 Ibid.
Jehangir’s policy was based on high diplomacy and friendship with the Ottomans despite depending on Safavid Persia. He took care not even to offend the Uzbeks. Shah Jehan in early reign revived the policy of his father of a Mughal-Ottoman-Uzbek alliance. However, Shah Jehan’s military intervention in Central Asia left him isolated in the world of Islam. The Ottoman initiative in 1649 as usual restored suspended diplomatic relations. At the time of Shah Jehan’s deposition in 1658 Mughal Ottoman relations had improved considerably.

At the time of Aurangzeb the Empire was beset with internal problems and further conquests. Aurangzeb attempted to send an embassy to Istanbul but did not enthusiastically make overtures of friendship. But the Ottomans magnanimously broke the diplomatic deadlock by taking the initiative of continuing the friendship. In 1689 Sultan Suleiman II (1687-1691) sent Ahmed Aqa as his envoy to Aurangzeb’s court.

Muhammad Shah was the last Mughal Emperor to acknowledge the Ottoman Khilafat. However it was during Shah Alam’s reign (1759-1806) that several Indian Muslim potentates acknowledged the Ottoman Sultan as the leader of the Faithful. The Bibi of Arrakal (‘Arrakal’ was the name of a small province in the South of India that was in control of some fragmented families of the last vestiges of the Mughal Empire. ‘Bibi’ is a highly respectful term used in the Urdu language for a lady of high rank and honour) addressed the Sultan as Khalifa and sought his help against the ‘high handedness’ of the English East India Company.

Tipu Sultan of Mysore (Mysore is another large province in the south of India which still remains today) also paid homage to the Ottoman Khalifa. He was the first Indian Muslim to receive a letter from the Ottoman Khalifa. There is evidence that after the demise of Shah Alam II the khutba (Friday prayer sermon) was read in India in the name of the Ottoman Khalifa. The deposition of Bahadur Shah II in 1857 proved to be a turning point in India’s relations with the Ottoman Khilafat. Henceforth Indian Muslims looked towards the Ottoman Sultan for sympathy and help. The Deoband School founded in 1857 also promoted pro-Ottoman sentiment among the Muslims of India. According to the author the programme of the Deoband was to educate the students in strict observance of the Sunni orthodoxy of the Hanafi school, and the seeking of closer relations with the Turkish Sultan-Caliph.

Even though the Mughal Empire phased out, the Muslims of South Asia looked up to the Ottoman Caliph as their protector so much so that when the British ventured out to remove the Khilafat there was almost a revolution in India by the Muslims who warned the British that if the Khilafat was abolished they would revolt against British rule in India. This is one of the most powerful chapters of Indian history before partition of the country and is known as the Khilafat Movement and must be dealt at length regarding the subject of Turkey’s relations with South Asia’s Muslims.

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8 Niccolao Manucci, II p. 433 in Riazul Islam, Indo-Persian Relations, p. 95. See also ‘Uzuncarcillin Osmani Tarihi,III part II’, p.268 in Riazul Islam, Indo-Persian Relations, p. 95.
9 S.S. Nadvi, ‘Khilafat aur Hindusthan’, p.175, in Riazul Islam, Indo-Persian Relations, p. 211.
Part Two: The effect of the First World War on Ottoman-Muslim Indian Relations

When the British declared war on Turkey in November 1914 there was a huge Indo-Muslim sympathy for Turkey. A state of war was brought about to the regret of Britain’s rulers of India. Despite the assurances by the British that the Muslim holy places in Arabia and Mesopotamia and the port of Jidda would remain immune from attack and that Hajj pilgrims will not be interfered with, the Indo-Muslims however remained suspicious. Nevertheless the Ulema did offer their fatwa or oath of loyalty to the British. But then the Arab revolt, the Mesopotamian campaign, the fall of Jerusalem and the Balfour declaration affected many articulate Muslims like the Ali Brothers. Abdul Bari began to feel that the British claims about the non-religious character of the war were tenuous if not a total sham. The British Prime Minister Mr Lloyd George added to the suspicion by dubbing Allenby’s conquest of Jerusalem as the ‘last and most triumphant of all Crusades.’ This did not seem to be a very reassuring rhetoric at that time.

Then on January 5 1918 Lloyd George spoke in parliament to reassure the Muslim subjects of the Empire once again. ‘The Ottoman empire would not be deprived of Constantinople, nor of the rich and renowned lands of Asia Minor and Thrace which are predominantly Turkish in race.’ But ‘the Arabs were entitled to a recognition of their own separation of the national conditions!’

This was another blow to the Indo-Muslim opinion but not as terrible as the one delivered after the war when the peace conference started. They were talking of carving up the Ottoman Empire and threatened to take away Constantinople from the Turks. The Ali Brothers in north India who led the Khilafat and the independence movement against the British watched these changes from isolation and anger. They organised a protest against the British decisions on Turkey. The Ali brothers who spearheaded this movement were occasionally called upon to read the khutba. One such reading brought objections from the British government who were then in control of India, because in the reading they had asked God to grant victory and succour to the Caliph of Turkey and ‘destruction to the infidels.’ But there was little the government could do. ‘You can’t blame me,’ said Shaukat the younger brother, ‘if the Caliph of Islam happens to be the Sultan of Turkey.’

Islam was the Indian Muslim’s sense of identity and near common denominator. Their pro-Turkish sentiment was based upon the feelings of Islamic community solidarity and the fact that the Turkish ruler was acknowledged as Caliph the symbolic head of the community.

Most electrifying for most of the Muslims of India was news of the Arab revolt against Turkey. The Council of the Muslim League passed a resolution condemning the Sharif of Mecca and his followers as enemies of Islam, and the knowledge that the British government must be involved was greeted with consternation and anger. So this kind of solidarity of Indo-Muslims had always existed with the Turkish people according to the archives of political history.

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The Mughals were successful in establishing themselves as the source of political legitimacy within India until the establishment of the East India Company depriving them from their original authority. Various Indian Muslim princes still continued to recognise the last Mughal Emperor even though they became independent of him. The Mughal Emperor’s name was read in the *khutba* in the mosques on Fridays and coinage was minted in his name. Other Indian Muslim princes seeking to establish hegemony in their own regions turned towards the Ottoman Sultan Caliph as a source of legitimacy. The *Khilafat* as a symbol of Muslim Unity and the supremacy of the Sharia had a special significance in the history of Muslim rule in India. The Caliph was important especially in times of political confusion and stood as a source of legitimacy based on the *Sharia*.

When the British finally extinguished Mughal rule after 1857 they eliminated a whole structure of religious-political authority. The Ottoman Sultan was one remaining authority as a Sunni potentate and hence the only possible candidate for Caliph. He was the symbol not only of the survival of the rule of Islamic law but also of past Islamic glory. In the late nineteenth century for a variety of reasons a new and widespread acknowledgement of the Ottoman Sultan as Caliph developed in India. Imams began to read the Sultan’s name in the *khutba* on Friday in some Indian mosques. Each time the Ottomans were involved in a war – the Russo-Turkish war of 1877-78, or the Greco-Turkish war of 1897 Muslims in India channelled fund drives for Turkish relief. Such actions did not imply political allegiance to the Turkish ruler but they were testimony to a sympathy for Turkey which could be exploited in the interests of Muslim solidarity whether within in India or without. The plight of the *Khilafat* seemed to reflect the fate of Islamic rule in India. And by the extension, the threatened position of the Muslim elite in the rapidly changing political conditions of the times. The precarious state of the institution of the *Khilafat* was concerning and created anxiety as this was the symbol of the supremacy of Islamic law. This also caused serious concern among local Indian Muslim elite. The *Khilafat Movement* emerged from such groups.

A quarter century later a group with the same ideology would demand a separate Muslim state from Hindu majority India. This eventually came into being in 1947 when India was partitioned forming the state of Pakistan that literally meant ‘land of the pure’. However in spite of the partition owing to ideological differences and cultural and geographical impediments nearly 45 per cent of the Muslims remained back in India. This is another powerful chapter in the history of the sub-continent and needs to be dealt separately at greater length.

What is fascinating is that this historical relationship between the Ottoman Turks and the Muslims of the sub-continent still exists till today, this time as Turkey-Pakistan friendship owing to the birth of Pakistan 65 years ago created by an elite group of Indian Muslims who feared ‘Hindu’ nationalist hegemony. The Ottoman Empire did not phase out completely. It survived till it gave way to the secular Turkish Republic in 1923. At the lowest ebb of their history the Ottoman Turks lost an empire but never their freedom. How different it is from the legacy of the Mughals!