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Research Article

## Emancipation and Opportunity: Position of Slaves in Islam and the Islamicate World with a Special Reference to Delhi Sultanate, *circa* 1206-1290 AD

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**Abstract:** This paper explores how slaves were treated in Islam, particularly within the larger Sunni vision of *shari'a*. In fact, this paper argues that slavery provided an opportunity for people from the lower strata of society to gain a position of power. In this regard, the paper takes the early Delhi Sultans (c.1206-c.1290) as a template to explain how slavery acted as a tool of emancipation and opportunity within the Islamicate<sup>1</sup> world during the medieval period. Unlike western societies, why slaves (*Mamluks*) would enjoy such an overwhelming power and authority in the Islamicate world requires adequate scholarly attention. Who were the people primarily recruited as enslaved people? What were the reasons for their recruitment? This paper searches answer for these questions. The paper also endeavours to understand the differences between slavery and the *mamluk* system that developed in the Islamicate world in the ninth century. How did slaves become the king? Did the Turks, who were predominantly enrolled as *mamluks* reciprocate the process of the *ghulam* system started by the Abbasid Caliph? If so, what was the reason for a person to choose slavery over free life? This paper examines all these questions to understand whether it was the Islamic ethical teaching that emancipated slaves or it was the political need of that age that converted slavery, particularly the *mamluk* system, into an opportunity for many.

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<sup>1</sup> Islamicate would refer not directly to the religion, Islam, itself, but to the social and cultural complex historically associated with Islam and the Muslims, both among Muslims themselves and even when found among non-Muslims. Massimo Campanini, "Heidegger in the Islamicate World," in *Rivista di Filosofia Neo-Scolastica*, Vol. 111, No. 3 (2019), pp. 735-740.

**Keywords:** Slaves; *Mamluks*; Islamic Ethics; Emancipation; Delhi Sultanate

**Abstrak:** Artikel ini mengeksplorasi bagaimana perbudakan diperlakukan dalam Islam, khususnya dalam pandangan Sunni yang lebih luas tentang syari'ah. Artikel ini berpendapat bahwa perbudakan memberikan kesempatan bagi orang-orang dari lapisan masyarakat bawah untuk memperoleh posisi kekuasaan. Dalam hal ini, artikel ini mengambil para Sultan Delhi awal (sekitar 1206–1290) sebagai contoh untuk menjelaskan bagaimana perbudakan berfungsi sebagai alat emansipasi dan peluang dalam dunia Islam pada periode abad pertengahan. Berbeda dengan masyarakat Barat, mengapa para budak (Mamluk) dapat menikmati kekuasaan dan otoritas yang begitu besar dalam dunia Islam memerlukan perhatian ilmiah yang memadai. Siapa saja yang terutama direkrut sebagai budak? Apa alasan di balik perekrutan mereka? Artikel ini mencari jawaban atas pertanyaan-pertanyaan tersebut. Artikel ini juga berupaya memahami perbedaan antara perbudakan dan sistem mamluk yang berkembang di dunia Islam pada abad ke-9. Bagaimana seorang budak dapat menjadi raja? Apakah bangsa Turki, yang sebagian besar direkrut sebagai mamluk, membalas proses sistem ghulam yang dimulai oleh Khalifah Abbasiyah? Jika ya, apa alasan seseorang memilih perbudakan dibandingkan kehidupan bebas? Artikel ini menelaah semua pertanyaan tersebut untuk memahami apakah ajaran etika Islam yang membebaskan para budak atau kebutuhan politik pada masa itu yang mengubah perbudakan, khususnya sistem mamluk, menjadi peluang bagi banyak orang.

**Kata Kunci:** Budak; Mamluk; Etika Islam; Emansipasi; Kesultanan Delhi

## INTRODUCTION

Slavery has been practised in almost every society throughout history from antiquity, and the Muslim society was no different from this. In antiquity and the medieval period, the slave system was indispensable to the socio-economic and political system. However, what was the position of slaves within the Islamicate world is a topic of enormous debate and discourse. Unlike the slavery system in the western societies, in the Islamicate world, a slave institute known as *mamluk* developed in the ninth century, which played both political and military roles in the administration of the Abbasid Caliphate and later established their own Sultanates in Cairo and Delhi. Therefore, in this paper, an attempt has been made to see how slavery was viewed within the broader Sunni views of *shari'a* and in the Quran. Can the views expressed in the Hadith and Quran for the institution of slavery be taken as a process of emancipating the slavery system? Then, the paper endeavors to examine how the *mamluk* system developed in the ninth century and how it was different from the typical slavery system. Can the emergence of the *mamluk* system be called as the opportunity for the slaves to acquire power within the broader Islamicate world? Finally, how far can the Delhi sultanate, particularly the early Delhi sultans (who were *mamluks* in their career), be taken as a template for emancipation and opportunity in the slavery system in Islam?

To understand the slave system within the Islamic traditions, one needs to look back to pre-Islamic Arabian society. Slavery was practised in pre-Islamic Arabia as in the rest of the world. Most of these slaves were African in origin, largely the Abyssinians. However, all the dark-skinned slaves were termed under broader connotations like the Habash or Ahbash.<sup>2</sup> When Islam came into existence in the seventh century A.D., an attempt by Prophet Muhammad can be witnessed where Prophet tried to minimise the rigorous nature of slavery. Therefore, this paper tries to understand how the Quran and Hadith have viewed slavery. Can the efforts prescribed in the Quran be termed as a process of emancipating the slaves towards liberation?

In the Islamic social order, political philosophy, economic status and legal system, every human is considered equal in all social phenomena. All Muslims are equal before the divine law.<sup>3</sup> Islamic jurisdiction, therefore, prohibits any type of action degrading a person to the statute of slavery.<sup>4</sup> Theoretically, Islamic law considers slavery unlawful.<sup>5</sup> However, during certain circumstances, like in the course of war, taking the defeated soldiers into slavery was permitted. This was primarily done to prevent excessive bloodshed in the war, providing shelter to the prisoners of war who has lost everything as these soldiers cannot be send back to their homeland due to political compulsions. Taking the defeated soldiers as slaves also meant to provide them the opportunities to get acquaintance with the culture of Islamic surroundings in a government that runs according to the dictates of God.<sup>6</sup> Nonetheless, the prisoners of war taking as slaves were permitted only in a legitimate war waged between two legal governments. No one was permitted to take a person as slave by abducting or kidnapping someone. Making someone a slave after a private razes were considered illegal in *shari'a*, as selling an infant by their parents has no legal sanctions whatsoever.<sup>7</sup>

Even while someone was taken to slavery, the person was entitled to get similar treatment in terms of food, clothing and dwelling as the master enjoyed. Furthermore, the slave should be provided with enough opportunity to be emancipated. *Quran* and Hadith advocate freeing the slave in return for considerable worldly and heavenly

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<sup>2</sup> Yusuf Fadl Hasan, "Some Aspects of the Arab Slave Trade from the Sudan, 7<sup>th</sup> – 19<sup>th</sup> Century," in *Sudan Notes and Records*, Vol. 58 (1977), p. 85

<sup>3</sup> Mohammad Talaat Al-Ghunaimi, *The Muslim Conception of International Law and Western Approach*, PhD Thesis submitted to the SOAS, University of London, 1965, p. 191

<sup>4</sup> In the time when Islamic government was not founded in Arabia, the believers had to release the slaves of the disbelievers by giving ransom to them, but when Islamic government was founded then no one could keep slaves under their possession against Islamic Law. When Islamic government was founded then the Arabian Muslims abolished slavery from many parts of the world. They released many slave subjects from the possession of the great tyrant kings. In the Holy Quran, God commands to the believers that they should release every kind of slaves in the path of God. Ali Ahmad Khan Jullundri, *The Glorious Holy Qur'an (After few Centuries a True and Easy Translation of The Glorious Holy Qur'an with commentary)*, World Islamic Mission, Lahore, 1962, p. 60

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. iii

<sup>6</sup> Farhad Malekian, *Principles of Islamic International Criminal Law*, Brill, Leiden, p. 229

<sup>7</sup> Muhammad Hamidullah, *Introduction to Islam*, Centre Culturel Islamique, Paris, 1959, p. 63

rewards.<sup>8</sup> The Quran also suggests certain means of integrating slaves, some of whom were enslaved after being captured in war, into the Muslim community. The *Quran* makes several references to slaves and slavery (2.178; 16.75; 30.28).<sup>9</sup> The Quran assumes the permissibility of owning slaves, which was an established practice before its revelation. Though the *Quran* does not explicitly condemn slavery, it does prescribe several instructions to the *umma* to improve the conditions of enslaved people, including freeing a slave, particularly one who belongs to Islam (2.177). It allows slaves to marry either other slaves or even a free person (24.32; 2.221; 4.25). The *Quran* also prohibits owners of slaves from prostituting unwilling female slaves (24.33). However, despite having this protection against one form of sexual exploitation, female slaves do not have the right to grant or deny sexual access to their masters. Instead, the Quran permits men to have sexual access to “what their right hands possess,” meaning female captives or slaves (23.5-6; 70.29-30). The *Quran* also prescribes setting free a slave in exchange for committing certain misdeeds (4.92; 58.3), whereas, in another verse, the Quran states that a slave should be allowed to acquire his own liberty (24:33).<sup>10</sup>

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Though Islamic law permitted the institution of slavery, it actually actively encouraged the emancipation of slaves in social relations.<sup>11</sup> Islam, having its origin in Arabia, could not shake off all the pre-Islamic social customs altogether at once. It needed to be done gradually. Therefore, Islam emphasised on abolishing slavery in gradual order without creating disorder in society. Islamic jurisprudence advocated the gradual eradication of slavery in society and hence provided a number of rights to the slaves, including encouraging the non-Muslim slaves to convert to Islam, which would provide them further protection. Simultaneously, it must be emphasised that “Islam does not allow compulsion to convert even slaves to Islam”.<sup>12</sup> Islamic law technically allowed equality between the slave and the master in certain basic daily human needs like food, clothing and shelter. The *Quran* not only strongly encouraged the emancipation of slaves, but also advocated that states must allocate a certain share of their budget for the purpose of “manumission” of slaves. An old interpretation of the Quranic verses in regard to the emancipation of slaves through state-sponsored “manumission” has stated that “a master should not refuse a suggestion by a slave who wishes to work and return his value.”<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Al-Ghunaimi, *The Muslim Conception of International Law and Western Approach*, pp. 149-150

<sup>9</sup> *The Quran*, Eng. trans. by *The Noble Quran in the English Language* by Muhammad Taqi-ud-Din Al-Hilali and Muhammad Muhsin Khan, King Fahd Complex for the Printing of the Holy Quran, Madinah, n. d.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> Farhad Malekian, *Principles of Islamic International Criminal Law*, p. 232

<sup>12</sup> Muhammad Hamidullah, *The Muslim Conduct of State*, Sh. Muhammad Ashraf, Lahore, 1945, pp. 210-211

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 210

The Islamic law further suggested that if a slave, either Muslim or non-Muslim, who fought for the “Islamic state” and was taken as a prisoner of war during the course of the war by the enemy state; after their release from the jurisprudence of enemy state, they must get the status of a freeman.<sup>14</sup> Islamic law also provided a similar rule for prisoners taken by Muslim armies but who actually succeeded in coming under another jurisdiction and, even though they were “slaves”, were thereby recognised as freemen.<sup>15</sup> Thus, it can be argued that Islamic jurisprudence has resisted the institution of slavery in various ways by providing numerous indirect incentives to the slaves for their emancipation. The reason for this indirect approach of Islam towards emancipating slavery can be viewed from the fact that the institution of slavery was a common problem and could not be solved in isolation from other social phenomena. Thus, *shari'a* explicitly emphasised that a *Salat* (prayer) can be led by any qualified man – a freeman, a slave or a manumitted slave.<sup>16</sup>

Thus, it can be seen that unlike the slave institution in the western society, where international law had legally permitted the practice, and there had not, therefore, been any effective movement against the institution of slavery until the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century. Selling and buying human beings was considered an important branch of national and international trade.<sup>17</sup> It was basically upon the institution of slavery that the economy of some European countries and the United States in particular developed.<sup>18</sup> In contrast, in Islam, the religious texts, which were also the basis for the domestic and international law within the Islamic world, took a practical approach to gradually incorporating the enslaved people into the Islamic social order and thus emancipating them.

In Islam, there were laws which were also prescribed for slave owners who maltreated or abused their slaves. These penalties can include forced manumission of the slave without any compensation to the owner. On the other hand, in regard to female slaves, if a female slave were a master’s own concubine, her children would be free and legitimate; they would not be the master’s property.<sup>19</sup> The children of a slave woman would bear the same social status as the children born from a legally married wife. The slave woman who carried the child of her master was known as *umm walad* (meaning the mother of a child) and was provided with certain protections in Islamic jurisprudence. An *umm walad* slave could not be sold, and she would gain the status of a

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 243

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 243

<sup>16</sup> *Sahih al-Bukhari* (Arabic-English) Vol. 1, Eng. trans. by Muhammad Muhsin Khan, Darussalam Publishers and Distributors, Riyadh, 1997, p. 395

<sup>17</sup> Farhad Malekian, *International Criminal Law: The Legal and Critical Analysis of International Crimes*, Vol. 1, F. Malekian, Uppsala, 1991, pp. 209-211

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 212

<sup>19</sup> Kecia Ali, *Marriage and Slavery in Early Islam*, Harvard University Press, London, 2010, p. 67

free woman after her master's death.<sup>20</sup> One more category of female slavery was "sexual slavery" in which young women were made concubines, either on a small scale or in large harems of the powerful, including the king, noble and elites in their *harems*. Some of these women were able to achieve wealth and power. These *harems* might be guarded by eunuchs, men who had been enslaved and castrated.

Thus, it can be argued that the approach of Hadith (*shari'a*) and *Quran* in regard to slavery is largely directed towards the idea that "freedom was the natural state of affairs for human beings". Islamic traditions tried to provide directives to their *umma* to give certain opportunities to the enslaved people, with the ultimate goal of freeing them altogether by bringing them to the larger Islamic society. Islam also provided the slaves with opportunities to claim their freedom under certain conditions. In Islam, slavery was virtually considered to be an adequate medium of proselytising non-Muslims rather than denigrating some individuals. Nonetheless, irrespective of prescribed rules and regulations in Islam to minimise slavery, in historical narratives, some deplorable incidents can be witnessed, and slavery was practised in some Muslim societies until recently when it was legally abolished in those countries.<sup>21</sup> Because, unlike the Islamic directives, the essential nature of slavery largely remained as it is in Islam, as it was in other societies.

However, the most significant characteristic of slavery within the Islamic society is that unlike the West (where slaves largely remained bonded), slaves in the Islamic world were not always at the bottom of the social hierarchy. They were even engaged in works that typically were reserved for the elites in other societies. In the Islamicate military institution, two types of slaves were in immense demand – the *mamluk* (literally meaning owned)<sup>22</sup> and the *ghulam* (slave), who were bought individually but later grouped into regiments. These slave soldiers used to live in specific neighborhoods, where they had their own mosques and marketplace. They were trained, supplied with their daily requirements and paid by their commanders. Thus, though these *mamluks* were technically under the Caliph, their primary loyalty remained with their commander.<sup>23</sup>

The slaves served in the military, not only as soldiers but led important conquests, served as *iqṭadars* (governors) in the provinces<sup>24</sup>, and even in the Abbasid caliphate under Caliph Al Musta'in (r. 862-866), a Turkish *ghulam/mamluk* achieved the position of

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., pp. 168-169

<sup>21</sup> Al-Ghunaimi, *The Muslim Conception of International Law and Western Approach*, pp. 149-150

<sup>22</sup> Yusuf Fadl Hasan, "Some Aspects of the Arab Slave Trade," p. 85

<sup>23</sup> Ira M. Lapidus, *A History of Islamic Societies*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2002, p. 104

<sup>24</sup> The emergence of a slave military elite and the new *iqṭa* form of administration assured not only the breakup of the empire but also the transfer of power from old to new elites. Thus, the *mamluks* were incorporated to the ruling elite circle within the caliphate. Lapidus, *A History of Islamic Societies* p. 108

a *wazir* of the empire and was in charge of the treasury.<sup>25</sup> Therefore, Ibn Khaldun opined that, in the Islamicate society, the purpose of purchasing a slave was not to enchain him; rather it was to provide appropriate training and education to intensify their zeal and strengthen their military prowess.<sup>26</sup> They were trained for military service and spent most of their life as a professional soldier. They were like foster children for their master.<sup>27</sup> Gradually, these soldiers acquired enormous influence in the ranks and files of the military system.

By the middle of the ninth century, the Abbasid Caliph Al-Ma'mun's (r. 813-833) brother and successor, Al-Mu'tasim Billah (r. 833-842), started to rely more on Turkish slave soldiers (*mamluk*) and recruited them in large numbers.<sup>28</sup> These slave soldiers were a new body of troops brought in from outside of the "Islamic world" who would serve him with single-minded loyalty cut off from their native land. The detribalised Turks were also brought into the Central Asian territories like Samarkand, Farghana and Shash as military slaves (known as *mamluk*).<sup>29</sup> Later on, a large chunk of these slave soldiers was sent to the Abbasid army. The Samanid ruler of Samarkand, Nuh bin Asad (r. 819-841), sent a large *mamluk* contingent to Mu'tasim Billah.<sup>30</sup> Caliph Al-Mu'tasim (r.833-42) materialised this body of soldiers with faithful servants in his Turkish *ghulams*.<sup>31</sup> According to Nizam al-Mulk, the Caliph al-Mu'tasim had a body of 70000 Turkish *ghulams* under his service, and he appointed many in high positions like governorship because he considered Turks to be the utmost loyal to the master.<sup>32</sup> The military slaves (*ghulams/mamluks*) acted as valuable subordinates for the caliphs as these

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<sup>25</sup> Hugh Kennedy, *The Armies of the Caliphs: Military and Society in the Early Islamic State*, Routledge, London and New York, 2001, p. 138

<sup>26</sup> David Ayalon, "The Great Yasa of Chingiz Khan. A Reexamination (Part C1)," in *Studia Islamica*, No. 36 (1972), pp. 118-120; Daniel Pipes, *Slave Soldiers and Islam: The Genesis of Military System*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1981, pp. 5, 201-202

<sup>27</sup> Roy Mottahedeh, *Loyalty and Leadership in an Early Islamic Society*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1980, p. 84.

<sup>28</sup> Adam Ali, "Turkish Slaves and Power," in Andrea L. Stanton (ed.), *Cultural Sociology of the Middle East, Asia and Africa, An Encyclopedia, Vol. 1: The Middle East*, Sage Publications Inc., Thousand Oaks: California, 2012, p. 117

<sup>29</sup> The *mamluks* were generally Turks from the Eurasian (particularly Central Asian) steppe lands and they were highly prized by their masters. These slave soldiers were provided with instruction in the Islamic faith and a rigorous training in the martial arts, and were not employed in any menial capacity.

<sup>30</sup> Osman S.A. Ismail, "Mu'tasim and the Turks," in *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London*, Vol. 29, No. 1 (1966), p. 15

<sup>31</sup> C. E. Bosworth, "Barbarian Incursions: The Coming of the Turks into the Islamic World," in C.E. Bosworth (ed.), *The Turks in the Early Islamic World*, Routledge: Taylor and Francis Group, London, 2016, p. 6; Istvan Vasary, "Two Patterns of Acculturation to Islam: The Qarakhanids versus the Ghaznavids and Seljuqs," in Edmund Herzing and Sarah Steward (eds.), *The Age of the Seljuqs*, I.B. Tauris, London, 2015, p. 4

<sup>32</sup> Nizam al-Mulk, *The Siyar al-Muluk or Siyasat Nama*, Eng. trans. by Hubert Darke as *The Book of Government or Rules for Kings*, Routledge, New York, 2002, pp. 60-65

soldiers were cut off from their origin or tribes and were also socially alienated<sup>33</sup>, which made these soldiers' military prowess channelled through one direction.

However, in the beginning years, these Turkish slaves served largely as palace guards and mercenaries.<sup>34</sup> Gradually, during the rule of Abbasid Caliph Mu'tasim Billah, the Turkish *ghulams/mamluks* became a dominant force in his army in terms of number and rank.<sup>35</sup> From AD 813 to 833, the governors of Syria and Egypt were the military leaders recruited from the empire's eastern provinces.<sup>36</sup> These military slaves were systematically trained and given important tasks in the Abbasid Caliphate, including provincial governors (*iqtadar*) and even *wazir*. The evaluation of the *mamluk* system was a major innovation for the Islamic world and bore a characteristic of the slave system, which was opposite to that of the theory of typical slave institution (in regard to western societies). Significantly, many Muslim regimes had sprung out of this *mamluk* institution in a later stage.<sup>37</sup>

The military slaves, who were known as *mamluks* were trained in an institute known as *tabaqa*, where a *faqih* (teacher) would teach them the *Quran*, the Arabic script, the *shari'a* and *shahada* (prayers) along with their military training.<sup>38</sup> The education was so rigorous that no *mamluk* was allowed to spend a night outside the *tibaq*.<sup>39</sup> However, gradually, even adults who had already acquired skills, such as bakery attendants, sailors or even traders, were incorporated into the *mamluk* institute.<sup>40</sup> The military training would start once the *mamluks* reach their majority by a *muallim* (instructor or expert). Once the *mamluks* acquire enough training they were sent to the hippodrome (*maydan*) for further training for cavalry training and to acquire expertise in lances, archery and so on.<sup>41</sup> The military slaves were of various ethnic backgrounds like Khipchak (Qipchaq) of Jaxartes and Volga; Karah Khitai of Sinkiang (also known as

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<sup>33</sup> Ibn Khaldun, *The Muqaddimah: An Introduction to History*, Eng. trans. by Franz Rosenthal, Princeton University Press, Princeton: NJ, pp. 103-105, 146-149; Orlando Patterson called it as the "social death" of slaves in his book *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study*, Harvard University Press, London, 1982.

<sup>34</sup> C. E. Bosworth, "Barbarian Incursions," p. 3

<sup>35</sup> Ismail, "Mu'tasim and the Turks," p. 17; Daniel Pipes, "Turks in Early Muslim Service," in *Journal of Turkish Studies*, 2, (1978), pp. 85-96

<sup>36</sup> Though all of them were not ethnically Turks, but being predominantly so, they came to be referred to as such. The word Turk was generally used more in a political or linguistic sense than in an ethnic sense. Many non Turkish clans and groups had adopted the Turkish language; hence they were also regarded as Turks. According to Juzjani the non Arabic speaking troops from diverse ethnic background were also called as Turks. Peter Jackson, *The Delhi Sultanate: A Political and Military History*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1991, p. 326

<sup>37</sup> Lapidus, *A History of Islamic Societies*, p. 104

<sup>38</sup> Hassanein Rabie, "The Training of the Mamluk Faris," in V.J. Parry and M.E. Yapp (eds.), *War, Technology and Society in the Middle East*, Oxford University Press, London, 1975, p. 154

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 154

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 154

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 157-158



black Chinese); Rumis (Seljuqs or Greeks); Ilbaris (Iltutmish's own tribe); Turk of Georgia (Turk-i-Garji) and some local from Hindustan as well like Hindu Khan.<sup>42</sup>

By the ninth century, the Abbasid Caliphate started disintegrating as its central authority weakened. Taking advantage of this evolving political situation, many of the *mamluk* (slave) commanders established quasi-independent states with their own rights.<sup>43</sup> For instance, Ahmad ibn Tulun (r. 868-884), a Turkish *mamluk* (slave soldier), who was serving as a governor (*iqtdar*) of Egypt under the Abbasid caliphate, established an independent state known as the Tulunid dynasty (r. 868-905).<sup>44</sup> Similarly, on the eastern frontiers of the Abbasid Caliphate, another slave commander (*mamluk*) Alptegin (r. 962-963) carved out a quasi-independent principality at Ghazna from the Samanid kingdom based in Bokhara.<sup>45</sup> After his death in 969, his slave commanders Bilkatigin (r. 969-977) and Pirey (r. 977) were at the helm of affairs in Ghazna. However, in 977, Amir Nasiruddin Sabuktegin,<sup>46</sup> another slave officer, deposed Pirey and established the effective Yaminid or Ghaznavid dynasty (r. 977-1186), which would carry arms deep into the region of Punjab.<sup>47</sup> The son and successor of Sabuktegin, Sultan Mahmud, is this dynasty's most famous or infamous ruler.

However, the most significant state where the slaves were Sultans was Delhi sultanate, particularly the first century of their rule in India (r. 1206-1290). The slaves (*mamluks*) were not only were Sultans, but they were the backbone of the whole administration – both military wings and civil affairs. In the Delhi sultanate political apparatus, the *mamluks* served in various capacities – prominently in two capacities – those who received large *iqtas* and were appointed as *iqtdars* (governors) and those who were serving at the Delhi court, in the Sultan's household known as *Bandagan-i*

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<sup>42</sup> Minhaj ud-Din Siraj Juzjani, *Tabaqat-i-Nasiri*, Vol. 2, Eng. trans. by H.G. Raverty as *A General History of the Mahommadan Dynasties of Asia, including Hindustan, 810-1260 AD*, Oriental Books Reprint Corporation, New Delhi, 1970 (first published, 1881). pp. 722-802; Irfan Habib, "Formation of the Sultanate Ruling Class of the Thirteenth Century", in Irfan Habib (ed.), *Medieval India, Vol. 1: Researches in the History of India, 1200-1700*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2021 (First published, 1992), p. 10; Jackson, *The Delhi Sultanate*, pp. 62-63

<sup>43</sup> David Ayalon, "Preliminary remarks on the Mamluk military institution in Islam", in V. J. Parry and M. E. Yapp (eds.), *War, Technology and Society in the Middle East*, Oxford University Press, London, 1975, pp. 44-58; Patricia Crone, *Slaves on Horses: the Evolution of the Islamic Polity*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1980; Daniel Pipes, *Slave Soldiers and Islam: the Genesis of a Military System*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 1981; C.E. Bosworth, "Barbarian incursions: The Coming of the Turks into the Islamic World," in C.E. Bosworth (ed.), *The Turks in the Early Islamic World*, Routledge: Taylor and Francis Group, London, 2017, pp. 4-10.

<sup>44</sup> Lapidus, *A History of Islamic Societies*, p. 107

<sup>45</sup> Mohammad Habib, *Sultan Mahmud of Ghaznin: A Study*, Aligarh Muslim University Publications, Aligarh, 1927, pp. 11-12

<sup>46</sup> It is noteworthy that Sabuktegin never used the term Sultan for himself, rather he always used the term Amir or Emir as his designation.

<sup>47</sup> Peter Jackson, "Turkish Slaves on Islam's Indian Frontier," in Indrani Chatterjee and Richard M. Eaton (eds.), *Slavery and South Asian History*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 2006, p. 64

*khass*, who tended, while on campaign, to be stationed in the centre (*qalb*) of the army.<sup>48</sup> Many of these *Bandagan-i khass* were the slaves, particularly purchased by the Delhi Sultan Shamsuddin Iltutmish. One of the important figures of the *Bandagan-i-khass* was Izzuddin Balban (subsequently known as Kushlu Khan) was acquired by Iltutmish in 1227 AD. According to Minhaj ud-Din Siraj Juzjani, by the time of the Iltutmish's death (1236), Balban had become the *muqta* of Baran province in modern-day Uttar Pradesh in India.<sup>49</sup>

Juzjani also provided details of twenty-five renowned and influential slaves of Shamsuddin Iltutmish, along with the ethnic background of nineteen of them, who held important administrative positions in the sultanate administration. For instance, Malik Nusrat-ud-Din Sher Khan was an Ilbari,<sup>50</sup> Malik Saif-ud-Din – a Kifchak,<sup>51</sup> and Malik Nusrat Khan-i Sunkar – a Rumi.<sup>52</sup> Sunil Kumar also gave a detailed list of twenty-five slave soldiers who belonged to different ethnic groups and held positions of significance.<sup>53</sup> Besides these, the *Habashi*, literally Abyssinian (African) *ghulams*, were also a significant element of the Sultanate military organisation.<sup>54</sup> Irfan Habib has noted that Iltutmish had bought his slave soldiers from various sources such as slave markets, and from slave traders.<sup>55</sup> Thus, it can be seen that unlike western concept of slavery, in the Islamic world the slaves were themselves part of the elites of political apparatus.

Another significant feature of the *mamluk* (military slave) system was that, apparently, a slave could own another slave. For instance, Shamsuddin Iltutmish (r. 1211-1236) was the slave of Qutubuddin Aibek (r. 1206-1210), who in turn was the slave of Sultan Muizzuddin Muhammad bin Sam (r. 1173-1206) of Ghur. Significantly, the masters of these slaves were not hesitant to get their daughters married to their slaves. Qutubuddin Aibek gave one of his daughters to his favourite slave, Iltutmish, while the other daughter was married to his slave commander Nasiruddin Qubachha.<sup>56</sup> Thus, being an enslaved person did not prevent these slaves from acquiring wealth, power and position in the political system of that age. There were instances when, after the

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<sup>48</sup> Minhaj ud-Din Siraj Juzjani, *Tabaqat-i-Nasiri*, Vol. 1, Eng. trans. by H.G. Raverty as *A General History of the Mahommadan Dynasties of Asia, including Hindustan, 810-1260 AD*, Gilbert and Rivington, London, 1881, pp. 634-636

<sup>49</sup> Juzjani, *Tabaqat-i-Nasiri*, Vol. 2, Eng. trans. by H.G. Raverty, pp. 778-779

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 791

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 788

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 787

<sup>53</sup> Sunil Kumar, "When Slaves were Nobles: The Shamsi *Bandagan* in the Early Delhi Sultanate," in *Studies in History*, Vol. 10, No. 1 (1994), pp. 32-36

<sup>54</sup> Jackson, *The Delhi Sultanate*, pp. 61-62

<sup>55</sup> Irfan Habib, "Formation of the Sultanate Ruling Class of the Thirteenth Century", p. 10

<sup>56</sup> Juzjani, *Tabaqat-i-Nasiri*, Vol. 1, Eng. trans. by H.G. Raverty, pp. 529-530

death of a high-ranking *ghulam*; there were questions of how his property should be disposed of.<sup>57</sup>

Thus, it can be seen that in the early Delhi Sultanate period, the slaves were the sultans. However, there is an argument that most of the Delhi sultans were manumitted before their ascendancy to the throne. Contrary to this view, Qutubuddin Aibek was manumitted only after he had already been the Sultan of Delhi.<sup>58</sup> Similarly, Juzjani refrains from making any reference to Ghiyasuddin Balban's manumission, though he provided a detailed description regarding Balban's career from the time he was first sold as a slave in Bagdad down to the time when he became the father-in-law of Sultan Nasiruddin Muhammad (r. 1246-1266), and thus virtually the de facto ruler of Delhi.<sup>59</sup> Apparently, formal manumission was not a matter of great concern so far as high-ranking slave-commanders were concerned. Therefore, Barani described the *Chihilgani*<sup>60</sup> as freed Shamsi slaves.<sup>61</sup> This also indicates that the *Bandagan*<sup>62</sup> enjoyed enormous power and influence in the Delhi Sultanate administration. Nonetheless, it can also be argued that the *Chihilgani* (the group of forty slave officers) might be were manumitted at the same time. The manumission of slaves was regarded as an act of piety, frequently authorised by a master on his deathbed; it is not unreasonable to suppose that this celebrated band (*Chihilgani*) may well have obtained their freedom upon the death of Sultan Shams al-Din Iltutmish in 633/1236.

However, the most noteworthy characteristic of the early decades of the Delhi Sultanate was the role of a group of forty slave soldiers, together known as the *Chihilgani*, who controlled every aspect of the sultanate administration – both civil and military.<sup>63</sup> They all were slaves of Sultan Shamsuddin Iltutmish (r. 1211-1236). During his reign, Iltutmish formed a body of Turkish *mamluks* or *ghulams* known as the *Chihilgani* – “the Forty”. Iltutmish created this corps of loyal supporters (his slaves) and kept it at the centre to check upon the power and ambitions of other military commanders who were also eyeing the Delhi throne.<sup>64</sup> However, gradually, this group

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<sup>57</sup> A.B.M. Habibullah, *The Foundation of Muslim Rule in India*, The Central Book Depot, Allahabad, 1976 (third edition), pp. 284-285

<sup>58</sup> Qutubuddin Aibek technically was a slave at the time of assumption of the throne of Delhi Sultanate at Lahore. However, he lost no time in obtaining manumission from his master's heir, Ghiyasuddin Mahmud. Habibullah, *The Foundation of Muslim Rule in India*, p. 286

<sup>59</sup> Juzjani dedicated his work to Sultan Nasiruddin Mahmud, the son of Sultan Iltutmish, but he wrote as a client of the *de facto* ruler and future sultan, Ulugh Khan, later famously known as Balban, who held the office of *naib* or “viceroy” and he accordingly focuses attention on Balban's master Iltutmish and on Iltutmish's slaves, the Shamsis, to whose number Balban belonged.

<sup>60</sup> Chihilgani was a group of forty slave soldiers (*mamluks*) who held enormous powers in the Sultanate of Delhi administration, and in the military organization during the period between 1236 and 1266 AD.

<sup>61</sup> Gavin Hambly, “Who Were the Chihilgani, the Forty Slaves of Sultan Shams Al-Din Iltutmish of Delhi?” in *Iran*, Vol. 10 (1972), pp. 57-62

<sup>62</sup> Special slaves bought by Delhi Sultans for military services were called *Bandagan*.

<sup>63</sup> Hambly, “Who Were the Chihilgani, the Forty Slaves of Sultan Shams Al-Din Iltutmish of Delhi?,” p. 57

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 57

became so powerful that they were even trying to place sultans of their choice on the throne and virtually controlled the wealth and power of the kingdom. Subsequently, they removed almost all the free-born servants working in the sultanate administration in various posts and replaced them with the *mamluks*.<sup>65</sup> Thus, by the middle of the thirteenth century, the *Chihilgani* became a part of the ruling class.<sup>66</sup>

A.B.M. Habibullah argues that a *mamluk* slave was considered more loyal to the master than a son.<sup>67</sup> He further stated that even the actions of *Chihilgani* should be viewed from the perspective that this group of forty was loyal to their master and his household. On behalf of their master's heir, they managed the state and considered themselves the sole custodians of the Iltutmish tradition. His degenerate successors could at any time have been supplanted, as indeed they were by Balban, but so long as the party remained, personal jealousy and fear of raking up general hostility among other Turks compelled the Forty to keep, even though as puppets, Iltutmish's children on the throne. For their sole *raison d'être* was loyalty to his family.<sup>68</sup> On the other hand, K.A. Nizami believes that after the Mongol invasion of Central Asian regions by the thirteenth century, many Turks of noble origin turned to the Delhi Sultanate, and Sultan Iltutmish readily employed these people within the Delhi administration. Therefore, to counter the growing influence of these newly arriving Central Asian Turks in the Sultanate body politic, the *mamluks* organised themselves into a corporate body known as *Chihilgani*.<sup>69</sup>

Whatever might be the reason for creating the *Chihilgani*, the fact remains that this group had wielded enormous power and influence in the Delhi sultanate administration, which is quite significant in relation to slavery is concerned. It seems that the *mamluk* system of slavery turned out to be an opportunity for many tribes from the Central Asian regions to get an opportunity to achieve significant political power. Now the question arises: who were these *mamluks*? The answer to the question is that the large sections of the *mamluks* were Turks by origin. It seems the military slave system (*mamluk*) provided an opportunity for the Turkish people to expose their military prowess. Fakhr-i-Mudabbir has affirmed that:

“It is common knowledge that all races and classes, while they remain among their own people and in their own country, are honoured and respected; but when they go abroad they become miserable and abject. The Turks on the contrary, while they remain among their own people and in their own country, are merely a tribe among other tribes, and enjoy no particular power

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<sup>65</sup> Stanley Lane-Poole, *Mediaeval India under Mohammedan Rule* (London, 1903), p. 76

<sup>66</sup> Ibn Hasan, *The Central Structure of the Mughal Empire and in Political Working Upto the Year 1657*, Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers Pvt. Ltd. Delhi, 1970 ( first published in 1936), pp. 44-45

<sup>67</sup> Habibullah, *The Foundation of Muslim Rule in India*, p. 284

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 284-285

<sup>69</sup> K.A. Nizami, *Some Aspects of Religion and Politics in India during the Thirteenth Century*, Aligarh Muslim University Publication, Aligarh, 1961, pp. 127-128

or status. But when they leave their own country and come to a Muslim country – the more remote they are from their homes and relatives the more highly they are esteemed and valued – they become amirs and army commanders (*sipah salaran*). Now from the days of Adam down to the present day, no slave bought at a price has ever become king except among the Turks; and among the sayings of Afrasiyab, who was a king of the Turks, and was extraordinarily wise and learned, was his dictum that the Turk is like a pearl in its shell at the bottom of the sea, which becomes valuable when it leaves the sea, and adorns the diadems of kings and the ears of brides.”<sup>70</sup>

By describing the virtues of Turks as ideal soldiers, the ninth-century chronicler at the court Mu’tasim Billah, Abu Uthman Amr ibn Baḥr al-Kinan al-Baṣri, commonly known as Al-Jahiz (d.155 AH-255AH) has mentioned that the Turks were the best among all the military serving in the Abbasid forces.<sup>71</sup> A Turkish soldier was trained in such a manner that he could shoot on the wing of a bird from horseback. Al-Jahiz emphasised that “If a thousand Turkish soldiers discharge a thousand arrows all at once, they prostrate a thousand men.”<sup>72</sup> He would always carry all their military equipment – his armour, beast and the harness of the beast. They were skilled in veterinary science, could care for their own horse, and knew how to keep fit. Besides these, they were swift horse runners, as a Turkman spent more of his life on horseback than he had spent sitting upon the earth. While other contingents advance ten miles, a Turkish contingent would advance twenty miles.<sup>73</sup> They were equally intelligent for combat as they were quick to note a weak spot in the enemy camp and would attack there. They were equally loyal and obeyed the order of the commander without an iota of question.<sup>74</sup> Thus, the Turks enjoyed having one of the best military qualities – loyalty, bravery, sincerity, intelligence, and skill in military tactics. Mohammad Habib believes that by the tenth century, the Turks had achieved a position among the Muslims similar to that of the *Kshatriyas* of the Hindus; that is, the Turks alone should lead an army.<sup>75</sup>

Because of this militaristic attitude of Turks, the early Abbasid rulers followed the policy of “leave the Turks alone as long as they leave you alone”.<sup>76</sup> Al-Jahiz has mentioned that “the Turk would rather obtain a maintenance by violent means than a

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<sup>70</sup> Cited from Blain Auer, “The “Advent of the Turks” and the Question of Turkish Identity in the Court of Delhi in the Early Thirteenth Century,” in A.C.S. Peacock and Richard Piran McClary (eds.), *Turkish History and Culture in India: Identity, Art and Transregional Connections*, Brill, Leiden and Boston, 2020, p. 91

<sup>71</sup> The Abbasid army was consisted of five divisions: the Khorasanis, the Turks, the Clients, the Arabs and the Barawys. The Barawys were immigrant barbarians living in Arabian Felix.

<sup>72</sup> C.T. Harley Walker, “Jahiz of Basra to Al-Fath Ibn Khaqan on the ‘Exploits of the Turks and the Army of the Khalifate in General,’” in *The Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland*, (Oct., 1915), p. 666

<sup>73</sup> Juzjani, *Tabaqat-i-Nasiri*, Vol. 1, Eng. trans. by H.G. Raverty, pp. 666-668

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 672

<sup>75</sup> Mohammad Habib, *Sultan Mahmud of Ghaznin*, p. 9

<sup>76</sup> Ismail, “Mu’tasim and the Turks,” p. 14

kingdom freely; he cannot enjoy his food at all unless he got it by hunting or plunder."<sup>77</sup> Therefore, the term 'Turk' itself is derived from the Arabic verb *taraka* meaning "to leave behind".<sup>78</sup> However, from the time of Abbasid Caliph Ma'mun (r. 813-833), things started to change. Khorasan became a royal province of the Caliphate during his reign.<sup>79</sup> A new era of caliphate-Turkish relationships began. Many prominent Turkish chiefs embraced Islam and a large number of Turks served in the Abbasid military as mamluk soldiers.

The military slave system was a unique feature of the Islamicate political structure, which provided opportunity and acted as a tool for emancipating slaves, rather than enslaving or chaining them. Now a question arises: Were the *mamluk* slaves viewed differently from other slaves in *shari'a*? Though *shari'a* discusses at length the many statuses of slaves, but ignores their functions. According to *shari'a* whether a slave was performing an ordinary task or running an empire as a Sultan, the law looked only at his legal status – that was slave.<sup>80</sup> The military slaves (*mamluks*) did not enjoy any specific or separate legal status.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion it can be said that the slave system in the Islamicate world was quite atypical to that of the slavery system in western countries, where a slave did not possess any social status. As Ibn Khaldun opined in the Islamicate society the purpose of purchasing a slave was not to enchain him, rather, it was to provide appropriate training and education to intensify their zeal and strengthen their military prowess.<sup>81</sup> They were trained for military service and spent most of their life as a professional soldier. They were like foster children for their master.<sup>82</sup> Gradually these soldiers acquired enormous influence in the ranks and files of the military system. Under Caliph Al Musta'in (r. 862-866), a Turkish soldier achieved the position of a *wazir* of the empire and was in charge of the treasury.<sup>83</sup> On the other hand, the Islamic jurisprudence laid out situation which would gradually emancipate the slaves from the Islamic society.

In the Islamicate world, a slave was qualified to do tasks of military command and governance – the tasks which were usually were reserved for free-borne people in the western societies. Slavery, rather, seems to act as an opportunity for many to acquire social status within the elite group. The Sultanate of Delhi was the best example of this,

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<sup>77</sup> Walker, "Jahiz of Basra to Al-Fath Ibn Khaqan," p. 675

<sup>78</sup> Ismail, "Mu'tasim and the Turks," p. 14

<sup>79</sup> W. Barthold, *Turkestan Down to the Mongol Invasion*, Eng. trans. by H.A.R. Gibb, Messrs. Luzac and Co., London, 1928, pp. 197-98

<sup>80</sup> R. Roberts, *The Social Laws of the Quran*, Routledge: Taylor and Francis Group, London, 2013 (first published in 1925), pp. 53-60

<sup>81</sup> Ayalon, "The Great Yasa of Chingiz Khan," pp. 118-120; Pipes, *Slave Soldiers and Islam*, pp. 5, 201-202

<sup>82</sup> Mottahedeh, *Loyalty and Leadership in an Early Islamic Society*, p. 84.

<sup>83</sup> Kennedy, *The Armies of the Caliphs*, p. 138

as the *Chihilgani* (a group of forty slaves) acted as *de facto* rulers in the Sultanate. On the other hand, slaves like Qutubuddin Aibek, Shamsuddin Iltutmish, and Ghiyasuddin Balban ruled Delhi as kings.<sup>84</sup> Therefore, the Delhi sultanate has even been designated as the “Mamluk Sultanate” with regard to the first nine decades of its history. It was founded by *mamluks*: Qutubuddin Aibek, one of the numerous Turkish slaves whom the Ghurid Muizzuddin is known to have accumulated, and Aibek’s own slave Shamsuddin Iltutmish. Thus, it can be said that the *mamluk* or military slave system was a significant innovation in the Islamic world, which allowed even the slaves to live within the elite circles of ruling apparatus. The *mamluk* status bore none of the degrading connotations associated with the typical slavery of western societies. These slave soldiers were generally Turks from Central Asian steppe lands and were bought with high prizes to train them for various military and administrative tasks. Hence, can it be said that, unlike western concept of slavery, the slave system, particularly the military slave (*mamluk*), acted as a tool of emancipation and opportunity for many?

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<sup>84</sup> Juzjani, *Tabaqat-i-Nasiri*, Vol. 1, Eng. trans. by H.G. Raverty, p. 497

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