

CENTRAL ASIAN SOCIETY IN IBN SĪNĀ'S TIME

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The period between the later part of the 10th century and the first half of the 11th century synchronises with the life span of Ibn Sīnā. During this period, in the vast geographical region in which he passed his life flourished as many as twenty-four big or small ruling dynasties and principalities. It was an epoch for any brave soldier to seize on the opportunity and carve out a small kingdom for himself. Of these, four were more prominent than the rest. These were the Samanids of Bukhara, the Saffarids of Siestan, the Buwayhids of Isfahan, and the Ghaznavids of Ghazna. Ibn Sīnā was born and brought up in the kingdom of the Samanids (849-1004 A.D.), associated himself with their court, benefited from their library and moulded his intellectual life and personality in their society. Not for this reason alone but more particularly for the royal and noble lineage of the Samanids, the vastness of their empire, the strength of their government and lastly their unique service to cultural advancement do we choose to confine our study to the society of Transoxiana under Samanids. But this does not mean that we preclude the cultural importance of other contemporary prominent dynasties already mentioned. For instance, we know that the later part of Ibn Sīnā's life was spent in Isfahan and that was as productive and fruitful a period of his life as the earlier one.

The Samanid kingdom extended from the outer fringes of the steppes in the north to the waters of the Persian Gulf in the south, from the shores of the Caspian in the west to the slopes of the Thien Shien in the east. But the sphere of influence of its court extended far beyond the frontiers of the kingdom even upto Baghhdad, the seat of the Caliph. Bukhara, the fabulous capital of Transoxiana, occupied, from early times, a commercially advantageous position. Here, in the past, used to meet the travellers and the traders, connoisseurs of art and men of letters from the East and the West; men of diverse nationalities like the Greeks, the Alexandrians, the Byzantiniens, the Chinese, the Indians, the Arabs, and the Persians. There was an excellent opportunity of assimilation and diffusion of ideas. Syncretisation of ideas must naturally have taken place and has been reflected at several occasions in the history of medieval Central Asia. Indeed

these manifestations enriched life and made valuable contributions to the process of cultural advancement of societies in the region.

Ibn Sīnā was born in 980 A.D., and by then Islam had been successful in Central Asia for nearly three centuries. As the new religion was assimilated into the life culture of a nomadic people who had partly been weighed down by the Zoroastrian religious hierarchical system for many centuries, new socio-economic and socio-religious problems began to appear. The Ash'arites or the followers of Abu'l-Ḥasan 'Alī al-Ash'arī (d. 984 A.D.) were opposed to the tenets of the Mu'tazila and endeavoured to establish the true religion through dogma. They were not great admirers of Greek philosophy and sciences. The most popular sect at the time in Transoxiana was that of Abū Maṣṣūr Matūrīdī of Samarqand (d. c. 943 A.D.), called Matūrīdīs. Generally speaking, they possessed orthodox views. The Mu'tazila, who had hitherto increased numerically in eastern Iran and Transoxiana, were now on a decline, of which one of the causes was the hostility of the Ash'arites. There were Hanafis, Shafi'īs, Maliki, Hanbalies, Ismā'ilīes, Ithna 'Asharis and other schools of jurisprudence and religious sects.

From contemporary history we learn of the practice of some groups of people to distinguish their members and votaries by the use of a dress of a particular colour or description, a distinction made primarily on political and ideological basis. For instance, the followers of Al-Muqanna clad themselves in white and were called *Sefīd Jāmgān* or *Mubayyada*. In Tabaristan some bore a red standard and were called *Surkh Alamān*. A group was called *Musawwada* for cladding itself in black and those who wore red were called *Muḥammira*.

Some of the sects, we are told, had instituted trusts to which their members made monetary contribution. In this respect, the Ismā'ilīs were more active and this practice is perhaps carried on by them even today. The Behāfrīdīs had directed their followers to contribute one-seventh of their holdings towards the works of public utility. Some religious and social groups had formed secret societies; for instance, those of the *Sufis* called *Halqa-e Sūfiyān* and those of the inmates of *Khanqah* called the *Khānqāhiān*. The most influential and effective of these secret societies was that of the *Ikhwān as-Safā'* who had reached the height of their success during the youth of Ibn Sīnā. The Ismā'ilīs and the *Ikhwān as-Safā'* usually held their meetings secretly and for any stranger, access to their circles was not possible unless he was formally initiated into it. Perhaps the Europeans in the medieval times had borrowed the idea of Lodge from them.

The politico-religious movements often culminated in powerful uprisings in Transoxiana and Khurasan with damaging results. The revolt of the Behāfrīdīs in Khurasan, of al-Muqanna in Transoxiana, of Abdallah bin Rāwandī in Baghdad,

of Mazayār in Tabaristan, of Khurramdinān in Iraq, of Babak in Azerbaijan, of Jawānmardān in Khurasan, of 'Ayyārān in Siestan, of Hamza, of Ustādsis, of Ishāq-e Turk in Transoxiana and lastly of Sanbād in Khurasan are in no case unimportant events if politico-religious history of the region is taken into consideration. In the days of Ibn Sīnā, many of these uprisings of the people had assumed and formulated their full politico-religious and socio-cultural dimensions. By the time Ḥasan bin Sabaḥ assumed the leadership of his followers, the Ismā'īlīs of Iran had been established in the Islamic world specially in Iran for about three hundred years.

From very early times and more particularly during the Sasanian regime, class distinction has been the bane of Iranian society as also of some more societies of medieval times. In a medieval feudal system the tillers of the land usually remained deprived of the rights of ownership. The rise of Islam brought some hope to the economically oppressed people because this new religion promised social equality and justice. But realities are bitter and social justice presupposes economic freedom. The Arab occupation was only partly helpful as the Arab rulers sometimes did not do full justice to the non-Arabs even to those who embraced Islam. They had to fight for their rights guaranteed to them by Islam and started the politico-religious movements like those of Shu'ūbiyya, Carmathians, Ismā'ilīs, Behāfrīdīs, Khurramdīnān, Sefid Jāmgān and others.

The class structure and the agrarian and tax systems under the Samanids in Transoxiana and Khurasan were the continuation of Sasanian system. The class structure of four estates remained as it was, as we are told by Naṣīru'd Dīn Ṭusī in *Akhlāq-e Nāsiri*. Words like *vazīr* and *dīwan* (bureau) continued to be used in the revenue records of the Muslims as in the Zoroastrian works.

Yet one more factor contributive to class struggle and feudal movement was the system which supported the Caliphate in Baghdad. The Turks of Central Asia, after the occupation of their land by the Arabs and their conversion to Islam, formed the military wing of the Muslim society whereas trade, commerce, science, learning, and peaceful occupations were pursued by the Iranians. The Caliphs inducted the western Turks into military service and appointed them as body guards but had to replace them as soon as they became threateningly powerful. The Samanids could neither resist the similar temptation of raising a contingent of body guards nor could neglect the eastern Turks especially the Uygurs who were always present behind the walls of their kingdom. The structure of the so-called Turkic aristocracy shall have to be taken into account while discussing the class structure of those times. These slave generals gradually rose to high positions and wielded enormous power and influence posing serious threat to several important ruling dynasties in the region. Many of these houses like the Chaghāniān, the Seemjurs,

the House of Maykāl, the Mamunids of Khwarazm, *etc.* made attempts to contain these slave generals and even came into clash with them occasionally as in the case of the struggle between Maḥmud of Ghazna and Mamun bin Mamun of Khwarazm. Many of these noble houses showed unmistakeable leaning towards the Shu'ūbiyyah and this is the reason why after the collapse of the Samanids, Ibn Sīnā chose to go to the court of the Mamuni princes of Khwarazm and later to that of the Ziyarids of Gurgan, Buwayhids of Ray and lastly to Isfahan.

In Samanid Bukhara teaching of rational sciences also formed the curriculum in the *madrāsahs* or colleges along with religious sciences like tradition, dogma, divinity, and exegesis of the Qu'rān. Among rational sciences, Greek sciences like logic, philosophy and mathematics were foremost. Reputed professors would deliver lectures and occasionally assembled the students in their own houses. In case a proposition remained unexplained or uncomprehended, it was referred to a scholar of repute at whatever distance he was and his opinion was sought. The booksellers in major towns were generally themselves learned. If a scholar placed with them order for a particular volume, the bookseller would produce one for him either in his own handwriting or through a scribe who was a professional called *kātib*.

Most of the professors delivered lectures publicly by mounting a platform. Sometimes a student would take exact notes of the lecture delivered. He was called *'āmil*. The writers as well as public men sometimes dictated their biographies of historical events to their students or subordinates and such writings were called *maqāmāt*. The secretaries and well-known authors would often retain copies of letters sent to different people and then would compile them into a volume. The volume containing copies of letters written to friends was called *ikhwanīyāt* and the one containing letters written on behalf of the ruler or the governing authority was called *sultānīyāt* and when brought out together, these would be called *rāsā'il*.

Contemporary historical works record information about several libraries which flourished in different parts of the empire. These, for instance, were the library of the Samanids in Bukhara, the library of Madrasah-e Ghazna, the Sabuniyan library at Nishapur, the Buwayhid library at Ray, the library of Sahib bin Abbad at Ray, the Jami'ul Akbar library at Merv, the Kakuyeh library at Isfahan, the Khujandian library at Isfahan, and others. The details of the libraries that existed in the trans-caspian region and in Iran which were outside the domain of the Samanid kingdom, need not be given here. But it has to be recorded here that it was at the library of the Samanid ruler Nuḥ bin Manṣūr that Ibn Sīnā studied for a long time.

In the period under consideration, we find that men of letters had to adopt some profession for living unless they were petty land-holders (*dehgan*). The only section

among them to receive stipend was that of the teachers in the *maktabs*. But when a particular college in any leading town developed into an institution of higher learning, the professors associated with them would receive their salaries from its trust (*Waqf*). The professors sometimes employed assistants to reproduce their class lectures. They were called *moid*(s). The learned scholars and professors generally kept themselves away from politics and from seeking court favours. In the case of Ibn Sīnā, it has been specifically said that he was the first among the *hukamā'* (philosophers) who associated himself with the rulers and the royal courts. This kind of royal favour-seeking and acceptance of service at the courts of rulers was considered to be a degradation for a scholar and an intellectual of repute. But in the case of Ibn Sīnā it has to be remembered that it was his expertise in medical profession which gave him an opportunity to serve the Samanid and Ziyasid rulers.

From the histories of the period we learn that Transoxiana under the Samanids generally fared better in terms of economic conditions of its people. The reason was that the mainland of the kingdom lay on the highway of trade and commerce between the East and the West. The ancient silk route in Samanid times originated in the borders of Kashghar and passing through Mawara an-Nahr and Khurasan reached Baghdad and onwards to Asia Minor and then to southern Europe. The Eastern Turks carried on their trade with the northern states through Khwarazm and Central Asia and this has been recently established when Samanid coins were found in the Scandinavian countries. But the condition of the common people benefiting from trade, their socio-economic status and their relations with the people engaged in productive activities remains an interesting field of investigation.

Despite these, the general condition of the masses of people during the period shall have to be viewed and understood in the light of the existing feudal system : the *dehgans* and group allegiances and more particularly in the context of the role of the tax collectors and fief holders. We should try to understand the situation in which such powerful Transoxianian and Iranian ruling dynasties as those of the Buwayhids and the Saljuqs had to seek the Caliph's recognition despite the fact that the Caliph himself owed his existence and position to them. The role of the theologians who drew inspiration from the Caliph at Baghdad cannot be underestimated. It was due to them that allegations of *ilhād* (atheism) and *zindīqa* (heresy) were levelled against the offenders and decrees were issued against the Shu'ūbiyyah, the Carmathians, the Ismā'ilī, the Mu'tazila and the like for their transgression from orthodox Islam. These people, considered the bitterest enemies of Islam and the Caliphate, were not spared and Ibn Sīnā was considered an Ismā'ilī. We know that Abu Ali Hasnāk bin Abbas Mikāl Hasnāk, the able vizir of the Ghaznavids, was branded a heretic for having visited the Shiite Fatimid Caliph of Egypt, while on a pilgrimage to Mecca. He was executed by the order of the Caliph of Baghdad.

The intelligentsia of the day, conscious of the atmosphere of orthodoxy, would seek refuge in religion or philosophy or mysticism. Some of those who were engaged in theological pursuits also, occasionally, took interest in philosophy and mysticism. We find that some of the outstanding intellectuals attempted at a rapprochement between religion and philosophy like al-Fārābī, Ibn Rashd, Fakhr Razi and others, or philosophy and mysticism like Ibn Sīnā and Afzal Kashani or lastly religion and mysticism like al-Ghazālī.

During Ibn Sīnā's days, there was a group of liberal thinkers in the Islamic world. Under Naṣr b. Ahmad's rule, the Ismā'ilīs were openly propagating their doctrines in Bukhara and other towns to the extent that they had succeeded in drawing to their fold a large number of Muslims including Rudaki, the influential poet-laureate and the father of Persian poetry. The practice of the Ismā'ilīs was to approach the people rather than the ruler or his courtiers and nobles. In order to understand clearly the intellectual atmosphere from which Ibn Sīnā drew inspiration in the development of his thought, I believe, one must study the history of Transoxiana and Iran thoroughly including the Ismā'ilī movement at that time. Ibn Sīnā's contributions cannot be understood without a thorough study of the time in which he lived.