

# Ziauddin Barani Indo-Islamic Political Thought

Indian political thought is not shaped only by ancient Hindu ideas or modern nationalist thinking. A large part of its richness comes from the Indo-Islamic tradition, where Persian-Islamic ideas of rule met Indian social conditions.

Among the thinkers who developed this tradition, Ziauddin Barani (1285–1357) was the most systematic and thoughtful political thinker of medieval India.

Barani was not just a court historian of the Delhi Sultanate. He thought deeply about power, justice, law, religion, class, and social order. His writings present the first clear and continuous theory of **Islamic kingship in the Indian setting**, which makes him a very important figure in the study of Indian political thought.

## Historical Context

Ziauddin Barani lived and wrote at a time when the Delhi Sultanate was passing through one of its deepest political and moral crises. The empire had expanded rapidly in the early 14th century, but **its institutions were weak, society was unstable, and rulers often experimented** without understanding the limits of power. Barani was not a distant philosopher. He was a court historian, an insider who saw governance failing from close quarters. His political thought grew out of this lived experience of disorder.

## The Historical Setting: Early–Mid 14th Century (c. 1320–1357)

Barani's lifetime coincided mainly with the Tughlaq dynasty, a period of great ambition followed by repeated failure. He served under three major rulers:

## **Ghiyasuddin Tughlaq (1320–1325)**

## **Muhammad bin Tughlaq (1325–1351)**

## **Firuz Shah Tughlaq (1351–1388)**

Each ruler tried to respond to growing problems, but in very different ways, and with mixed results.

## **Ghiyasuddin Tughlaq (1320–1325)**

Ghiyasuddin came to power after the violent end of the Khalji dynasty. The Sultanate was already unstable.

### **Major developments**

Restored law and order after years of brutality.

Tried to balance military strength with administrative discipline.

Reduced excessive taxation and controlled corruption.

### **Limitations**

His reign was short.

Institutions remained fragile.

The empire was still too large to control effectively.

Barani saw Ghiyasuddin as a strong but cautious ruler, someone who understood the need for discipline but did not live long enough to institutionalize it.

## **Muhammad bin Tughlaq (1325–1351)**

The real crisis of Barani's time unfolded under Muhammad bin Tughlaq, whom Barani knew personally.

Muhammad bin Tughlaq was highly intelligent, ambitious, and well-read, but his ideas were far ahead of his administrative capacity.

## **Major administrative experiments**

### **1. Transfer of Capital (Delhi to Daulatabad)**

**Aim:** Better control over the Deccan.

**Reality:** Forced migration caused massive suffering.

**Result:** Economic collapse, depopulation of Delhi, public resentment.

### **2. Token Currency Experiment**

**Aim:** Increase money supply using copper and brass coins.

**Reality:** No control over minting; people forged coins freely.

**Result:** Inflation, loss of trust in state authority, financial chaos.

### **3. Heavy Taxation in the Doab**

**Aim:** Increase revenue to fund military campaigns.

**Reality:** Taxes imposed during famine years.

**Result:** Peasant revolts, abandonment of villages, agricultural decline.

## **Rebellions and fragmentation**

Continuous rebellions in Bengal, Deccan, Gujarat, and Sindh.

Governors turned independent.

The Sultan spent most of his reign suppressing revolts.

**Barani witnessed how unchecked rationalism and excessive ambition destroyed political stability.** This deeply shaped his belief that rulers must respect tradition, social hierarchy, and moral limits.

## **Breakdown of Authority**

By the mid-14th century, the Sultanate faced: **Weak central control, Autonomous provinces, Declining respect for law, Rise of corrupt officials, Social mobility based on wealth, not merit or lineage**

Barani was especially disturbed by low-born individuals rising to high offices merely through money or favor. He saw this as a sign of moral decay and political disorder.

## **Tension Between Ulema and Sultans**

Another major feature of Barani's time was the conflict between religious scholars (ulema) and political rulers.

### **Key issues**

**Should the Sultan strictly follow Islamic law (Sharia)?**

**Or could he use political reason (aql) to govern?**

Muhammad bin Tughlaq often ignored or sidelined the ulema, relying on his own judgment. This alarmed Barani, who believed that political authority without moral and religious restraint leads to tyranny and chaos.

## **Firuz Shah Tughlaq (1351 onwards)**

Firuz Shah came to power after the exhaustion of Muhammad bin Tughlaq's reign.

### **Major features**

Abandoned risky experiments.

Restored traditional administration.

Gave importance to the ulema.

Promoted Islamic institutions, charities, and public works.

### **Limitations**

Overemphasis on orthodoxy.

Decline in military strength.

Loss of territories continued.

Barani supported Firuz Shah because he saw him as a ruler who respected moral order, even if he lacked ambition.

## Core of Barani's Political Thought

### 1. Theory of Kingship

For Barani, the Sultan is not just a ruler; he is **God's vice-regent on earth**.

Political authority is sacred, not merely contractual or coercive.

The ruler must:

- Protect religion
- Maintain social order
- Enforce justice
- Preserve hierarchy

Here, Barani stands close to classical Islamic political theorists like **Al-Mawardi**, but he adapts their ideas to Indian realities where Muslims ruled over a vast non-Muslim population.

Unlike modern democratic ideas, Barani does not believe in popular sovereignty. Instead, sovereignty flows from divine will, mediated through a morally disciplined ruler.

**Al-Mawardi** was a medieval Islamic thinker who tried to save political order at a time when the Abbasid Caliphate was weak and real power lay with military rulers. In his famous work *Al-Ahkam al-Sultaniyya*, he argued that government is necessary to prevent chaos and protect religion. For him, the Caliph was the supreme authority, chosen by the learned and powerful, but even

a weak or unjust ruler was better than no ruler at all. He accepted political realities and allowed delegation of power to sultans and governors, **as long as they formally upheld the Caliph and enforced Islamic law**. Thus, Al-Mawardi's political thought balanced religious ideals with practical compromise, aiming to preserve stability, unity, and moral order in society.

## **2. Justice**

Barani repeatedly asserts that **justice is the soul of kingship**. Without justice, power becomes tyranny, and the state loses legitimacy.

However, his idea of justice is not modern egalitarian justice. It is a **hierarchical justice**, where:

- Everyone gets what is appropriate to their social rank
- Stability matters more than equality
- Order is more important than mobility

This vision reflects medieval political realism, but it also reveals Barani's deep anxiety about social change, especially the rise of lower classes into power.

## **3. Supremacy of Sharia**

Barani firmly believes that **politics must remain subordinate to religion**. The Sultan, however powerful, must obey the **Sharia**.

He criticises rulers who:

- Promote un-Islamic customs
- Encourage luxury and moral corruption
- Appoint unworthy people to high office

Yet Barani is not a theocrat. He recognises political necessity but insists that **expediency must never replace moral law**.

# Barani and the Idea of Hierarchy

## 1. Defense of Social Stratification

One of the most debated aspects of Barani's thought is his **strong defence of social hierarchy**. He believed society must remain divided into:

- Nobles
- Religious elites
- Commoners
- Menial classes

He opposed:

- Social mobility
- Education for lower classes
- Political inclusion of non-elite groups

For Barani, hierarchy was not injustice—it was **divine design**. Equality, in his view, leads to chaos.

## 2. Attitude to Non-Muslims

Barani supports the traditional Islamic distinction between Muslims and non-Muslims. He upholds:

- Payment of jizya
- Political subordination of non-Muslims
- Religious supremacy of Islam

However, in practice, he accepts coexistence and administrative inclusion of Hindus, showing the **tension between theory and reality** in medieval governance.

# Barani as a Political Realist

Despite his moralism, Barani is no idealist dreamer. He understands:

- The limits of law in times of crisis
- The need for strong authority
- The role of fear and discipline in governance

In this sense, Barani anticipates later realist traditions in political thought, where stability is valued above moral perfection.

## Major Works

Ziauddin Barani (c. 1285–1357) was one of the most important historians and political thinkers of the Delhi Sultanate. His writings give us a deep insight into the politics, administration, religion, and social structure of medieval India. His major works are the following:

### 1. **Tarikh-i-Firoz Shahi**

This is Barani's most famous and important historical work.

It is a chronicle of the Delhi Sultanate covering the period from Balban (1266 CE) to the early years of Firoz Shah Tughlaq (1351 CE). Barani personally witnessed many of the events he described, especially during the **reigns of Alauddin Khalji, Ghiyasuddin Tughlaq, and Muhammad bin Tughlaq.**

The work discusses:

Administrative experiments and failures

Economic policies (price control, taxation)

Rebellions and provincial revolts

Relations between the Sultan and the ulema

Moral decline of rulers and nobility

Barani did not write history merely to record events. He believed history should teach moral and political lessons, especially to rulers.

## **2. Fatwa-i-Jahandari**

This is a political and ethical treatise, not a narrative history.

In this work, Barani explains his **ideas of ideal kingship and governance**.

He strongly supported:

A strong, authoritarian ruler

### **Rule based on Islamic law (Sharia)**

Social hierarchy and inequality as divinely ordained

He argued that:

Nobility should be hereditary

### **Low-born people should not be given high offices**

The Sultan should suppress un-Islamic practices

The book reflects **Barani's orthodox Sunni worldview** and his anxiety about social mobility under rulers like Muhammad bin Tughlaq.

## **3. Salwat-i-Kabir**

This is a religious–ethical work, though less famous than the other two.

It deals with:

Moral conduct

Religious duties

### **Proper behavior of rulers and subjects**

The work reinforces Barani's belief that politics and religion cannot be separated and that the state must uphold Islamic moral order.

## **4. Hasratnama (attributed)**

This is believed to be a personal, reflective work.

It expresses Barani's:

### **Disappointment with worldly politics**

Sense of injustice faced by learned men

### **Regret over moral decline in society**

Though not as historically significant as Tarikh-i-Firoz Shahi, it helps us understand Barani's personal frustrations and intellectual mindset.

## **Critical Evaluation**

### **Strengths**

- First systematic political theory of the Delhi Sultanate
- Deep integration of ethics and politics
- Realistic understanding of power
- Clear vision of state responsibility

### **Limitations**

- Rigid social conservatism
- Hostility to equality and mobility
- Religious exclusivism
- Justification of authoritarian rule