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Book and Library Culture in the Delhi Sultanate: A Historical Study

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ABSTRACT :

This article examines book and library culture in the Delhi Sultanate from the early thirteenth century to the early sixteenth century. Historians have described the politics and armies of the Sultanate in detail, but the making, keeping, and teaching of books has usually been treated as a thin preface to the Mughal Imperial workshop. The study reads Persian court chronicles, the public works memoir of Sultan Firuz Shah Tughluq, Arabic notices of Delhi, Sufi biographical compilations, and the surviving college buildings and manuscripts, and places them beside recent scholarship on sultanate book art and Persianate literary culture. The evidence shows a real book culture, dispersed across the royal court, the madrasa, the Sufi hospice, and private scholarly households, rather than gathered in one catalogued royal library of the later Mughal kind. Paper was being made in Delhi by the thirteenth century, while palm leaf remained in use for many Sanskrit and Jain books. Arabic served law and scripture, Persian served history and court poetry, and Hindavi served devotional and romance writing. Firuz Shah rebuilt older colleges, endowed teaching houses, and sponsored compilation and translation, including versions of Sanskrit books taken from the temple library at Nagarkot. The sack of Delhi in the year thirteen ninety eight broke this concentration, and book production then grew more visibly in the provincial sultanates. The article argues that sultanate book culture should be judged by its institutions, languages, and scripts, not by the absence of a Mughal style library archive.

Keywords: Delhi Sultanate, madrasa libraries, Persian manuscripts, paper and calligraphy, Hindavi book culture

Introduction

The Delhi Sultanate, from the establishment of an independent Turkish sultanate at Delhi in the early thirteenth century to the defeat of Ibrahim Lodi in 1526, is among the best studied political formations of medieval northern India. Its armies, revenue experiments, and succession crises occupy the standard narrative [1,2]. The culture of the book has not received the same attention. Surviving catalogues of a royal library, shelf lists, and the names of librarians are scarce. Illustrated manuscripts that can be tied with confidence to a Delhi workshop are fewer than those of the later Mughal court. For a long time this silence was read as absence. The Sultanate was allowed a literature, above all the Persian histories and the poetry of Amir Khusrau, but not a book culture in the institutional sense.

That reading is no longer satisfactory. Art historians have shown that the Indo-Islamic codex of the sultanate centuries has a history of its own, with distinctive scripts, illumination, and paths of making, even where the place of production was a provincial capital rather than Delhi itself [3]. A recent account of the history of the book argues that sultanate book culture was not a failed draft of the Mughal kitabhkhana, but a separate formation, marked by scribes who moved among Arabic, Persian, and Hindavi, and by genres that were transcreated rather than simply imported [4]. Material-culture studies have likewise insisted that objects, inscriptions, and reused buildings carried meaning across the political divide usually called Hindu and Muslim [5]. Within the longer Persianate history of India, the Sultanate is the period in which Persian became a language of rule and of historical writing in the Gangetic plain, without yet becoming the only language of the book [6].

The problem selected for this study is therefore a precise one. What forms of book and library culture can be recovered for the Delhi Sultanate, and in which institutions did they sit? The question is not whether Delhi possessed an imperial library on the scale later claimed for the Mughals. The question is where books were copied, endowed, taught from, translated, and lost, and what that pattern tells us about learning under the sultans.

The principal contemporary witnesses are already familiar to political historians, but they have been read too narrowly. Ziya al-Din Barani's *Tarikh-i Firuz Shahi* preserves the memory of courts that prized jurists, poets, and historians, and it describes the college raised by Firuz Shah beside the restored reservoir at Hauz Khas [7]. Shams Siraj Afif, writing after the death of Firuz Shah and after Timur's invasion, continues that account and records the learned circle around the sultan, including the Quran commentary associated with Tatar Khan [8]. Firuz Shah's own *Futuhat-i Firuz Shahi* lists mosques, colleges, and hospices among the public works he claimed, and it states that he rebuilt the madrasa of Shams al-Din Iltutmish [9]. Ibn Battuta, who lived in Delhi in the 1330s and served as a judge, supplies an outside description of a court that employed foreign scholars and treated calligraphy and disputation as marks of the ruler [10]. Arabic notices compiled from travellers and informants, above all the Indian chapters of Shihab al-Din al-Umari, describe Delhi as a city of learned men in the time of Muhammad bin Tughluq [11]. Earlier, Minhaj-i Siraj Juzjani's *Tabaqat-i Nasiri* shows the first sultans already gathering scholars who had fled the Mongol advance [12].

The aim of this paper is to set these notices beside the architectural remains of the colleges, the evidence for paper, and the manuscripts and scripts

studied by recent historians of the book. The argument that follows is that library culture in the Sultanate was real, plural, and fragile. It was lodged in madrasas, khanqahs, and private scholarly households as much as in any royal store of books, and it was badly damaged when Delhi itself was sacked.

Materials and Methods

The study area is the Delhi Sultanate in its north Indian core, from Lahore and the Punjab through Delhi and the Doab to the eastern districts that remained under sultanate authority, between the early thirteenth century and 1526. Provincial sultanates that broke away in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, especially Jaunpur, Malwa, Gujarat, and the Deccan, enter the account only where their book production helps to explain what happened to sultanate traditions after the weakening of Delhi. Kashmir is noticed only for the paper industry associated with Zain al-Abidin, as a neighbouring court that shared the same craft world.

The method was historical and source-critical. No new excavation or laboratory analysis was undertaken. The work proceeded by close reading of published editions and translations, comparison of claims across genres, and placement of those claims against standing buildings and against the manuscript corpus already defined by art historians.

The primary corpus was read in a fixed order. First came the Persian court chronicles: Juzjani for the thirteenth century [12], Barani for the period from Balban to the early years of Firuz Shah [7], Isami's *Futuh al-Salatin* as a Deccan-based verse history hostile to Muhammad bin Tughluq [13], Afif for the reign of Firuz Shah [8], and Yahya bin Ahmad Sirhindi's *Tarikh-i Mubarak Shahi* for the Sayyid period after Timur [14]. Second came documents written in the voice of the ruler or of the chancery. *Futuh-i Firuz Shahi* was used in the Persian text edited by N. B. Roy [9]. The anonymous *Sirat-i Firuz Shahi* was used through the extract published with the archaeological memoir on Kotla Firuz Shah [16]. Arabic geographical and secretarial writing was represented by al-Umari's Indian chapters in the English translation of I. H. Siddiqi and Qazi Mohammad Ahmad [11], and by the later Egyptian compilation of al-Qalqashandi, which preserves figures for teaching establishments in Delhi [15]. Third came literary and biographical works that show books in use rather than in inventories: Amir Khusrau's *Khaza'in al-Futuh*, in Muhammad Habib's translation [18], and the early seventeenth-century Sufi biographical compilation *Akhbar al-Akhyar* of Abdul Haqq Muhaddith Dehlawi, read as a record of earlier hospice memory rather than as an eyewitness chronicle [24]. Muhammad Qasim Firishta's early seventeenth-century history was admitted only as a later compiler, and only for the Nagarkot books, a report that cannot be treated as contemporary [23].

Selection was limited to passages on scholars, colleges, copying, translation, endowments, and the destruction of Delhi. Market regulations, token currency, and military narrative were excluded except where they explained the movement of scholars. Claims that appear in only one late source were marked as such and were not treated as equal to a contemporary notice.

Modern scholarship published from 1990 onward was used to frame method and comparison, not to replace the sources. Political histories supplied the chronological frame [1,2]. Studies of sultanate manuscripts and scripts supplied the material evidence for the codex [3,4]. Work on translation, Persian as a political language, and multilingual literary culture supplied the interpretive setting [5,6,19-22]. The history of paper was taken from a recent survey that builds on earlier studies of Indian paper manufacture [17]. An older survey of the Indian book was retained only as a point of comparison with the Mughal centuries [25].

Dates were converted to the Common Era and left in that form. Where a chronicle gives a round number, such as a count of colleges or of captured books, the number is reported as a claim of that text, not as a census. The limits of the method are those of the sources. The Sultanate did not leave a library catalogue. What can be reconstructed is the institutional map of the book, not the contents of a single shelf.

Results

The reading produced five related findings.

First, the book in the Delhi Sultanate was an institutional object before it was a catalogued collection. The earliest sultans received scholars from Khurasan, Ghazni, and Lahore who arrived with the Mongol disruptions, and the court of Ilutmish already supported a madrasa later remembered by name. By the fourteenth century the places where books were kept and read could be distinguished as the royal court, the madrasa, the Sufi hospice, and the private household of the jurist or poet. No source described a single royal library with a keeper, a register, and a lending rule of the sort later associated with the Mughal kitabkhana. What the sources did describe was a scatter of collections attached to teaching and worship.

Second, the college was the most visible library space. Firuz Shah's memoir stated that he built mosques, colleges, and monasteries, that the details were entered in a waqf document, and that he rebuilt the madrasa of Shams al-Din Ilutmish, which had fallen into ruin, and gave it sandalwood doors. The same reign left the standing complex at Hauz Khas, on the reservoir first dug under Alaaddin Khalji and cleared again under Firuz Shah. Contemporary description presented this Madrasa-i Firuz Shahi as a large teaching house beside the water, with rooms for study and a mosque. Afif's account of the reign added a learned circle in which Quran commentary and law were compiled, including the commentary known as *Tafsir-i Tatar Khani* and the legal collection later called *Fatawa-i Firuz Shahi*. Arabic secretarial writing, preserved in al-Qalqashandi, transmitted a figure of about one thousand places of instruction in Delhi in the time of Muhammad bin Tughluq. The figure is a report, not a survey, but it agrees with the architectural and chronicle evidence that teaching houses were numerous.

Third, the materials and languages of the book were mixed. Paper was known in Sind before the eleventh century, and paper manufacture was established in Delhi by the thirteenth century, although output did not always meet demand. Palm leaf and birch bark did not disappear. Sanskrit and Jain books continued on the older supports, and paper manuscripts of Hindu texts become common only late in the fifteenth century. Within the Indo-Islamic codex, Arabic carried the Quran, law, and commentary; Persian carried history, court poetry, and prose treatises; Hindavi carried devotional verse and romance. Copyists used naskh and thuluth, and also the Indian Quran hand later called bihari. Illustrated books that can be placed in the sultanate world become numerous only from the late fourteenth century, and many of the secure examples belong to centres other than Delhi, including Mandu.

Fourth, translation and compilation were acts of the court as well as of the college. Under Firuz Shah a translation and compilation circle produced legal digests and Quran commentary. The later chronicle tradition recorded that the sultan carried off a large body of Sanskrit books, numbered at thirteen hundred, from the temple of Jawalamukhi at Nagarkot, and that a court scholar, Izzuddin Khalid Khani, turned one work on the sciences and on omens into Persian verse under the title *Dalail-i Firuz Shahi*. Muhammad bin Tughluq's court, as described by Barani and by Ibn Battuta, already employed jurists, physicians, and poets, and the sultan himself was remembered as a calligrapher. Amir Khusrau's prose and verse for successive sultans show a court that expected books to be finished, presented, and rewarded.

Fifth, the concentration at Delhi was broken in 1398. Timur's sack scattered scholars and destroyed stocks of books along with the rest of the city. The Sayyid and Lodi courts patronised Persian writing, but the denser surviving evidence for sultanate book art after that date lies in the provincial capitals. Delhi remained a city of graves, colleges, and memory, not the sole workshop of the Indo-Islamic book.

These findings are summarised in Table 1 and Table 2.

Table 1. Settings of book use recovered for the Delhi Sultanate

Setting	What the sources show	Strength of evidence
Royal court	Poets, historians, and jurists maintained; books presented and rewarded; some translation ordered	Strong for patronage; weak for a catalogued royal library
Madrasa	Named colleges from Iluttmish onward; Firuz Shah's rebuildings and waqf; Hauz Khas complex still standing	Strong
Khanqah	Books kept in the hospice circle; later biographical memory of a library at the hospice of Nizamuddin Auliya	Moderate; partly later memory
Private scholarly household	Jurists and poets owned and copied books; colophons rare for Delhi itself	Moderate
Compilation circle under Firuz Shah	Legal digest, Quran commentary, and reported Sanskrit-to-Persian verse	Strong for compilation; the Nagarkot count is late

Table 2. Languages and supports of the book

Language or support	Principal genres	Period note
Arabic	Quran, law, commentary	Continuous; bihari Quran hand is a sultanate feature
Persian	History, court poetry, prose treatises	Dominant court language from the thirteenth century
Hindavi	Devotional verse, romance	Oral first; paper manuscripts increase later
Paper	Indo-Islamic codex, and later some Hindu books	Manufacture in Delhi by the thirteenth century
Palm leaf and birch bark	Sanskrit and Jain books	Continued beside paper

Discussion

The results change the usual contrast between a bookless Sultanate and a bookish Mughal Empire. The contrast is real at the level of archives. Mughal workshops, album prefaces, and librarian's notes survive in a way sultanate equivalents do not [25]. It is not real at the level of practice. Jackson's political history already depends on a class of Persian-writing scholars attached to the court [1]. Kumar's account of the early Sultanate shows that the new regime was built in part by immigrant learned men, not only by soldiers [2]. Once those men are taken seriously as owners and producers of books, the missing catalogue looks like a problem of survival and of genre, not like proof that books were unimportant.

The madrasa evidence is the firmest part of the map. Firuz Shah's claim to have rebuilt the college of Iluttmish is his own, and it is the kind of claim a public-works memoir exists to make, but the building programme itself is corroborated by the standing Hauz Khas complex and by Afif [8,9,16]. Endowment, which he says was written into a waqf document, is the legal form by which a medieval Islamic library was usually kept alive: the book collection was an appendage of a funded teaching house, not a separate museum. The round figure of about one thousand places of instruction, carried in al-Qalqashandi from earlier informants and consistent with the picture of Delhi drawn by al-Umari, should not be pressed as a census [11,15]. It does show that observers from outside the Persian court tradition thought of Delhi under Muhammad bin Tughluq as a city dense with teaching. That density is the setting in which a library culture can exist without a famous royal librarian.

The same caution applies to the Nagarkot books. Firishta, writing in the early seventeenth century, is the source of the count of thirteen hundred Sanskrit volumes and of the versified *Dalail-i Firuz Shahi* [23]. Contemporary texts confirm Firuz Shah's interest in building, law, and the learned circle, and they confirm a Nagarkot campaign, but they do not inventory the temple library. The report is plausible, and it fits a wider pattern of translation across religious lines, but it remains a later compilation. Flood's study of objects that moved between traditions makes the larger point without depending on that number: sultanate culture worked by translation and reuse, not by a sealed Islamic book [5]. Siddiqui's reading of sultanate social life, drawn from poetry, romance, and Sufi texts as well as chronicles, points the same way [22].

Language sharpens the picture. Alam has shown that Persian in India was a political and ethical language, not a neutral medium [19]. In the Sultanate that function is already visible in Barani's didactic history and in the advice literature attached to his name. Auer's study of authority in the Delhi Sultanate shows how history writing itself legitimated the ruler [20]. The book of history was therefore a political object. It was also only one object among several. Orsini's account of multilingual literary culture east of Delhi warns against treating Persian as the whole of the written world [21]. Hindavi romance and devotional verse belonged to performance first, and Gupta notes that they left a mark on illustrated manuscripts and on the way scribes wrote the vernacular [4]. A library culture limited to Arabic law books would have missed most of what was read and heard.

The manuscript evidence pulls in a slightly different direction from the chronicle evidence, and the difference is instructive. Brac de la Perrière's corpus of sultanate book art finds illustrated Indo-Islamic manuscripts difficult to document before the late fourteenth century, and it finds many of them in centres such as Mandu rather than in a documented Delhi workshop [3]. Chronicle writers, by contrast, speak of scholars and colleges from the thirteenth century. The two findings can sit together. Early sultanate book culture was heavy in text, endowment, and teaching, and light in the luxury illustration that later collectors preserved. Quran copies in bihari script, which run through the period, are the clearest continuous material trace. Paper supply supports the same chronology. Rezavi's survey places manufacture in Delhi in the thirteenth century, while noting that demand outran supply, and it recalls earlier paper at Mansura in Sind [17]. A city that makes paper, endows colleges, and pays historians is a city with a book culture, even if its finest illustrated codices were later made elsewhere or have not survived.

The hospice is the least secure setting, and it should remain so. Later biographical tradition, gathered by Abdul Haqq, remembers a library in the khanqah of Nizamuddin Auliya [24]. Sufi circles certainly owned books: malfuzat and maktubat are themselves book forms. A dedicated hospice library in the thirteenth or fourteenth century is likely, but the detailed notice is early seventeenth-century memory. It is better used as evidence that Delhi's learned families believed their saints had kept books than as an inventory.

Timur's sack is the break that court chronicles and the later geography of the book both require. Sirhindi writes in a Delhi that had to be rebuilt as a political centre [14]. After 1398 the skills did not vanish. They moved. Provincial courts inherited scribes, scripts, and genres, which is why a history of the sultanate book that looks only at Delhi will understate the tradition [3,4]. Eaton's longer Persianate narrative makes this movement part of a wider pattern, in which Persian learning was never confined to one capital [6]. The Lodi century restored a measure of court patronage at Delhi, but it did not restore the fourteenth-century concentration.

The limits of the study follow from the sources. Waaf documents named by Firuz Shah have not survived as a series. Colophons rarely say "copied at Delhi" in a form that can be audited. Numbers of colleges and of captured books are rhetorical. Women copyists and the ordinary book market are almost invisible, although the existence of paper makers and of professional scribes implies a market. These gaps do not return the inquiry to the older verdict of absence. They mark the difference between a dispersed medieval book culture and a centralised imperial library archive.

Conclusion

Book and library culture in the Delhi Sultanate was dispersed, endowed, and multilingual. It lived in colleges, hospices, and scholarly households, and at a court that rewarded historians, jurists, and poets, rather than in one catalogued royal library. Paper was available in Delhi from the thirteenth century. Arabic, Persian, and Hindavi divided the work of the book among them. Firuz Shah's reign is the clearest moment of college building, compilation, and reported translation. The sack of 1398 broke the Delhi concentration and pushed the visible production of manuscripts towards provincial courts. The Sultanate should not be measured by the Mughal kitabkhana and found empty. It had a book culture of its own, and the surviving evidence is strong enough to map its institutions even where the shelf lists have gone.

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