Some Aspects of the Origin of the Turks, Their Penetration into Central Asia and Its Impact

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In the middle of 6th Century A.D there appeared on the Chinese horizon a people barely known previously which, within a few years, not only changed the balance of power in Mongolia—the traditional basis of great, nomad empires—but also introduced into the scene of Central Asian history an ethnic and linguistic entity which in earlier times could not be identified or isolated from other groups showing the same cultural characteristics. It bore the name Turk, an appellation left in legacy to most later peoples speaking a Turkic language.¹

The role of Turks in the history of Central Asia can safely be termed as pivotal. They achieved and maintained for a long period the political unification of a stretch of land that reached from the confines of China to the borders of Byzantium. They intervened with lasting effect in the destinies of China Iran and Byzantium; they conveyed knowledge between the Greek, Iranian, Indian and Chinese worlds. The importance of their empire is not limited to political history only but is pregnant with a rich volume of cultural and linguistic history also. Among all the peoples of Inner Asia

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the name Turk became and has remained the hallmark of the unity of peoples, the preservation of civilizations and promotion of cultural legacies.

In the early history of Central and Eastern Asia everything is more or less conjecture, but this at least is certain, that among the various nomad tribes who roamed the plains of Sungaria and the great desert of Gobi, and from time to time broke loose in one of those great waves of migration which paralysed the peoples of Europe and of western Asia there were two races which alternately filled the role of the "scourge of God", the Mongols and the Turks.²

The Turks' penetration in Central Asia was, in fact, the penetration of a nomadic culture which, in due course, influenced the economic, political, military and cultural spheres of Central Asia in particular and those of the Islamic world in general and once changed the course of Islamic history.³

The minds of scholars have been occupied for a long time with the questions as to how the Turks first established their state and how they penetrated into Central Asian territories and that what was the consequence of their incursions into Central Asia. In this paper an attempt has been made to see: i) the emergence of Turks on Central Asian scene in various capacities and ii) the consequence of their penetration into the said region. We have tried to limit ourselves to the period that preceded the Turks' conversion to Islam.

Chinese data concerning the origin of the Turks are contradictory and difficult to interpret. The earliest source, the *chu shu* records two traditions. According to first the Turks are the descendents of the *Hsiung-nu* and the other tradition reported by the same source says that the Turks' ancestors originated in the state of *So* to the north of the *Hsiung-nu*. Yet again the *Sui-shu* tradition puts the Turks as to have been mixed *Hu* which is a generic for 'Barbarians' of 'Soghdians'. Another tradition puts them

belonging to a branch known as Ural-Altaic of what are called the "Yellow" peoples. Relatively more close to them, than the Chinese, are the Finno-Ugrains (Finns and Hungarians), the Samoyeds, the Tungus and in particular the Mongols.⁶

Without any broad disagreement with the majority of Turcologists, it is however, certain that the earliest Turks known to history—although not called by that name—were the Huns. Under the specific name of "Turks" they made their appearance both in the Chinese sources (in the east) and in the Byzantine sources (in the west) in 6th Century A.D, in the territory that is now Mongolia, but very soon expanding towards the south and the west.

The orkhan inscriptions,⁸ the earliest written records associated with them frequently refer to a splendous and great Turkish empire, "The Turkish sky", "The Turkish Earth and Water" and so forth⁹

"When high above the blue sky and down below the brown earth had been created, betwixt the two were created the sons of men. And above the sons of men stood my ancestors, the Kaghans-Bumin and Ishtemi. Having become the masters of the people, they installed and ruled its empire and fixed the law of the country. Many were their enemies in the four corners of the world. They caused them to bow their heads and to bend their knees. These were wise Kaghans, these were valiant Kaghans; all their officers were wise and valiant; the nobles; all of them, the entire people were just. This was the reason why they were able to rule an empire so great, why, governing the empire, they could uphold the law."

It is difficult to reconstruct their history in detail in the two or three centuries that followed for the foreign sources that happen to mention them occasionally and even

the orkhan inscriptions, provide a succession of different names which seems to have been no more than an enumeration of the names of political groups and tribal federations.¹²

In the 6th Century, a Turkish 'Empire' existed in the northern part of what in modern times has been called Russian 'Turkistan', from the SyrDarya/Jaxartes to the borders of Siberia and from the Altai to the Volga. The memory of this empire was long to survive among the Turks and other peoples of Central Asia. At the same time to the East and South of Altai in Mongolia but also in what we now call Chinese 'Turkistan' the group of the oghuz (later called the Ghuzz by Arabo-Persian writers). was dominant. 3

As already pointed out, this empire was gradually expanding towards the south as well as the west due to many factors, among which overpopulation was the main. ¹⁴ In this way the presence of new and growing population compelled the Turks to evacuate the countries that had served as the base for their expansion. Thus the Turks living between the Altai and the Volga had to undertake new migrations to the west or south. One of their branches—the Karluks occupied the passes between the two 'Turkistans' and another group— the Oghuz settled to the north of the lower Syr Darya and the Aral Sea. ¹⁵

By the sixth century, both the steppe belt and the sedentary zones of Central Asia, that had hitherto been populated by Iranians, were completely Turkified in view of the fact that penetration of the Turks was accompanied by the language and culture of entrants that served as the main tools for Turkification. Thus towards the end of 6th century Turks were already settled in the Transoxianian as well as Cisoxanian areas.

Modern scholars R.N. Frye and Aydin Sayili too have fairly concluded that i) Turks were already in the regions of Khurasan and Transoxiana at the time of Arab

conquest and remained there after the Arab domination ii) that the Turks were town and village dwellers except in regions where natural conditions imposed a nomadic life on them and iii) they probably had a relatively large population in Central Asia and infiltrated in fairly large numbers into the Near-East.¹⁷ During the seventh and eighth centuries, the main opponents of the Arabs in Central Asia were the Turks who were divided into a mosaic of independent states each ruled by a Turkish Lord called Dihqan.¹⁸

With the swift progress of Muslim conquests in Central Asia, the Arabs came into contact with the Turks in different capacities: as merchants, warriors, slaves, artisans, and so forth. Conquests were also followed by the exchange of prisoners which helped to make the new religion and the neighbouring culture or at least some aspect of them known to the Turks. At the same time as a result of the state policy Turks gradually came to be admitted into the fold of Islam. The State evolved and implemented large scale, far-reaching and effective strategies to consolidate the Turkish territories and to Islamise the Turks as an integral component of the new setup.¹⁹

Within a short period, as a result of steps taken by the state, the Turks came to be seen holding important bureaucratic positions in the civil services of Muslim state and army. Thus, the walls of opposition and segregation were converted into the grounds of consolidation, accommodation and assimilation.

The consequence of all this was that Turks started playing active and integrated roles in Islamic polity and culture. Good soldiers, they became just sufficiently Islamised to be associated with the Muslim armies and, eventually, to be employed in that capacity even in other regions of the Islamic world.²⁰ By the middle of 9th century, fairly considerable number of Turks were entering the Caliphate as military slaves. In the account of Ibne-Khurdadbih, a contemporary geographer, one comes across the

names of different Turkish groups as the Turgesh, Kimek, Qarluq, Toghuz-oghuz, Oghuz, Kirghiz, Qipchak and Khazars having entered the lands of Caliphate.²¹ Towards the end of Umayyad rule a trickle of Turkish domestic slaves was brought into the households of the Arab and Persian upper classes, and by early Abbasid times, the governors of Khurasan and the East regularly included contingents of Turkish slaves in their tribute and presents to Baghdad. Some of the slave mothers of the Abbasid Caliphs were clearly Turkish; thus the mother of al-Muktafi (b. 877A.D.) is named as Jijak (i.e. Chichek-flower).22 There are frequent references in the sources of the presence of Turkish Ghulāms in the armies of Abbasid period. Although the exact numbers of such forces are not known, yet Ayalon having used such general expressions as "immense numbers", "innumerable prisoners or war", "very great numbers", "great forces etc., points towards the fact that the entry of Turks into Caliphal domains was initially in the capacity of slaveguards.²³ Alone on the both banks of Sir-Darya lived Turks, numbering some hundred tents, who had accepted Islam and were booked into the armed forces of Samanids.24 The number of Turkish Ghulāms in the army of Samanid Nasr bin Ahmad (914-43) is said to be 10,000.25 Similarly the Samanid governor of Khurasan, Alp-Tegin, had, 2,700 Turkic Ghulāms,26 and Karakhanid Arsalan Khan Muhammad had 12,000 Ghulāms in his army.

Most of the slaves thus handled by the Samanids were brought to be sold in the permanent slave markets such as that of Shash and Isfijab. Some Turks fell to these markets as prisoners of war or as booty in consequence to the inter-tribal warfare among different Turkish tribes. One such case was Mahmud Ghazanavi's father Subktigin, who, according to his own statement was captured by *Tukshi* tribe and sold into slavery at Shash.²⁷

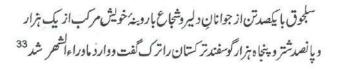
Throughout the last days of Ummayyad rule and during the whole of Abbasid

period the influx of Turkish slaves into Islamic empire continued at a gradual speed. The *ghulams* were now becoming a profitable commodity. The battles fought in the lands between Caucasus and the lower Don during this period are said to have been fought mainly with the motive of securing Turkish, Slave and Ugrian slaves. There was a diaspora of Khazar Turkish soldiers in both the Caliphal and the Byzantine armies. Turkish *ghulāms* with the *nisba* of "*al-khazari*" are commonly mentioned in the Caliphal guards of 9th and 10th centuries and many traditionists of this name are found in the contemporary religious sources who must have been the descendents of Turkish slave guards who had integrated themselves into the Arabo-Islamic religious tradition.²⁸

The growing demand and the popularity of the Turks in the social set up of Islam was due not only to one cause. The causes were military, economic and political. The Arabs were getting increasingly disinterested in the military profession for having a natural tendency and potential for more peaceful and comparatively profitable profession of trade and commerce. And there is no doubt that Central Asian provinces, particularly Transoxanian region offered tremendous opportunities of lucrative trade.²⁹ In the neighbourhood of Bukhara at Paykand, lived a community of great merchants who used to be away for half of the year on their trading expeditions with China and other Caspian provinces. Same is true of many other Transoxanian cities.30 Again, the Caliphs and the provincial governors knew the value of Turks as soldiers, their particular aptitudes (as mounted archers) for which they had no equals among the subjects of the empire. By all means Turks were, from the middle of 9th century, preferred to Khurasanians who were too deeply divided by their religious and political rifts to be of absolute loyalty and therefore, had become unreliable. We know that Abbasid Caliph Mamun relied most on his Khurasanian Turkish troops Abna ud daula' in the struggle with his brother Amin for Caliphate.31

Whether or not the presence of Turkish *Ghulāms* in the armies of Samandis, Ghaznavids and Saljuqs affected the demography of Central Asia, has to be considered in the light of the fact that these *Ghulāms* were brought to Central Asia as individuals, without their families, but later on they got married to the local ladies which, with the passage of time produced a noticeable demographic effect. Thus we see the military and political role of Turks was out of all proportion to their demographic position.³² Thus in spite of their low proportion in the population of Central Asia, Turks seem to have been possessing remarkable political and military roles in the Central Asian society is evident from all contemporary data.

Having considered the entry of Turks in the Islamic social structure in different capacities, let us try to see some aspects of its impact on the economic, military and political life of Central Asia. There is no denying the fact that Turks penetration into the sedentary zone sometimes caused destruction and economic decline, in case they entered in large migratory groups as they usually did especially on the eve of the decline of Ghaznavid authority in Central Asia. They would trample down the crops, cut down the orchards for fuel and sometimes the irrigation network too was destroyed. When Saljuq Turks intended to migrate to Khurasan along with their flocks, families and tents, they made a petition to Sultan Mahmuud in 1018 A.D, requesting him to allow them to occupy some grazing grounds in Khurasan across the oxus in the vicinity of Nasa and Abivard.



After having got the permission from Sultan Mahmud to settle in the area, they causd large scale disturbances and even resorted to destructive activities to the extent that in the following year the people of Nasa, Abivard and Farava raised an agitation and made complaints against the Turks before the Sultan:

Despite all this the Turk penetration into sedentary regions of Central Asia could not be termed as entirely negative. The Turk nomads utilized regions which for ecological reasons, would otherwise remain unused; their laborious nature was fitting to the hard and tough pursuits of agricultural economy which in consequence was favourable for the development of exchange and commerce.³⁶ It has been observed that the mass migration of Saljuq Turks into Central Asian territories did not produce any major negative effect on the economy. "On the contrary it may well have contributed to the prosperity of the country in what they helped to provision the towns with milk products, meat and wool, and may, perhaps in the field of trade also have made some contribution in the matter of transport."³⁷ This was itself pointed out by the Turk migrants to Mahmud Ghaznavi assuring him that they would prove a boost to the regional economy and would strengthen the armies of the Sultan.

"درخراسان وطن سازیم اورا از ماراحت باشد، وولایت اورا از مافراخی باشد که مامرد مان دشتی ایم گوسفندان فراوان داریم واندر کشکراواز ماانبوی باشد"³⁸

Another aspect of life in which the impact of Turk penetration was more prominent was 'warfare'. Quite a lot has been said in various works about the martial nature of Turks and their inherent warring capabilities. Before the Arab conquest, the Turks were employed in military service in Central Asia as mercenaries in Soghdian principalities by different warring Dihqāns. Their fighting talents have often been utilized or exploited by the rulers of sedentary regions. They as separate tribal groups, fought as a coalition against the Arabs on a number of occasions. Turks' lust, love and deep acquaintance with warfare was often the uniting force for them in spite of their wide ranging internal animosities. Soldiery and militarymanship was their identity since their emergence on the scene of Central Asia. Ayalon describes the Turkic Mamlūks as of crucial importance for the whole history of Islamic civilization. He ascribes this to "the superiority and relative reliability of the Mamlūk system on the one hand, and the far better military qualities of the human material from which the Mamluk recruits had been selected on the other." Islamic writers in the adab works, manuals of war and "Mirrors for Princes" praise the Turks as the military people par excellence, brave, loyal and inured to hardship through their upbringing in the harsh steppes. Jahiz has written one full chronicle in the praise of Turks " رسالة في مناقب الاتراك " in which he highlights the qualities of Turkish slaveguards —Ghilman.40

The acquaintance and expertise of Turks with art of war, weaponry and contemporary military technology goes back to the early period of the 5th century while they were living under Juan Juan rule in the Altai and worked on the manufacture of iron implements.⁴¹

Turkic archery and effectiveness of Turkic ways of war and Turkic weapons are the established facts of medieval warfare ⁴² Besides a superior archery especially from the horseback, which was common to all of them, the Turks knew two different means of battle. One was based on light cavalry tactics, the other on the use of heavy armoured cavalry. Most probably, this military superiority of Turks was due not only to their supreme horsemanship, archery and physical fitness produced by training that usually began in early childhood and formed one of the basic conditions of the nomadic way of life but also by a sense of cohesion, based on their social system, that surpassed that of armies of sedentary population. Thus the military importance of Turks was inseparable from their nomadic way of life and social organisation. After coming into the fold of Islam; the Turks demonstrated their superior methods of fighting and their military prowess which proved in turn a crucial factor in turning the world of Islam as a superior military power.

The political role of Turks too has been the theme of a lot of works. The long-drawn conclusion however, reached about on this issue is that in spite of the Turks ability to establish their position very strongly in the Central Asian empires, they could not contribute much to the stability of political order before their conversion to Islam. Their great political history actually begins from the days of Ghaznavids, in case one starts from their entry into the fold of Islam. However, limiting oneself to the theme of this paper, it can be safely pointed out that Turks were the main tools of that machine which translated the old Persian theory of kingship and bureaucracy together with the Islamic theocracy into practice- a theory that has virtually exixted with unbroken continuity till this day at least in the eastern sphere of Muslim world.

REFERENCES AND FOOTNOTES:

1. Denis. Sinor, The Establishement and Dissolution of the Turk Empire in Studies in Medieval Inner Asia, Great Britian, 1997, p. 285.

2. S. Lane Poole, Turkey, E.J.W Gibb and Arthur Gilman, Lahore, p.3.

3. Robert L. Canfield, Turko-Persia in Historical Perspective, Cambridge, 1991, p. 64.

4. The Hsiung-nu are often reffered to as Huns who held sway over great parts of Inner Aisa, and particularly Mongolia, between (a.210 B.C and 155 A.D.(Sinor, op. cit, p. 224.)

- 5. Chinese sources always mention more than one Turk (*Tu'-Chueh*) people. They speak of "White cloted Turks" (*pai-fu*), The "Yellow head Turks" (*huang-t'ou*), of "Skiing Turks". literally wooden horse Turks (*Mu-ma*), of "ox-hoved Turks" (*Niu-T'i*). It would appear that Chinese knew of what we may call splinter groups, ethnically and linguistically similar to or identical with the Turks proper, but living either on the fringes or broders of centrally governed Turk States. (Sinor, op. cit, pp. 288-89, 146)
- 6. Claud Cahen, *Pre-ottomon Turkey*, London, 1968, p. Iff; Also see: Tamara Talbot Rice, *The Saljuks of Asia Minor*, London, 1961, p. 25.
- 7. Lane Pole, op. cit, p. 4; Cahen, op.cit, p.1
- 8. Inscriptions engraved in old Turkic on the banks of river Orkhan the mid 8th century.
- 9. Rice, op:cit, p. 4
- 10. The founders of first Turk empire according to Orkhan inscriptions.
- 11. Sinor, op. cit, p. 297.
- 12. Cahen, op. cit,p. 1
- 13. Yuri Bergel, in, Canfield, op. cit, pp. 53-54; Before this division the two 'Turkistans' had in ancient times been inhabited by the Indo-European peoples whom classical authors called Scythians, Sarmatians and so on, and whom modern discoveries have also made known under such names as Tokharians and Sogdians. On the basis of major ecological division of Central Asia, the area is subdivided into two zones, nortern 'steppe' and southern 'Sdenetary'. The dividing line between the two parts of Central Asia goes roughly from the Arab sea along the northern limites of the Syr Darya basin and the Teinshan. Both the zones tended to remain politically fragmented and the temporary unification which they from time to time experienced was brought by the conquerors from outside: Persians and the Arabs from the South, eastern Turks and Mongols from the East. cf: Cahen, op. cit, p. 2 ff.
- 14. Cahen, op.cit, p. 4.
- Ibid.

16. C.E. Bowworth, 'Barbarian Incursions' in Islamic Civilization, ed. D.S Ridhards, Oxford, 1973, p.1; Also see: Bregel op.cit, p. 54. (The result of this proces of Turkification is visible even now. According to the Figures of 1979, more than eighty nine percent of the total indigeneous population of Central Asia is registered as speakers of various Turkic languages.

17. R.N. Frye and Arydin Sayili, "Turks in the Middle East before the Saljuqs, JAOS, New Haven, 1943, vo. LXIII, p. 195, See: Bosworth, op.cit, p. 2 and Bregel, op.cit, p. 55.

- 18. Turks offered a tough resistance to the Arabs and engaged them in continual wars till 715 A.D when Qutabia bin Muslim—the commander in chief and the governor (a strong protege of Hajjaj-Walid policies of consolidation in central Asia) conquered the whole of Transoxiana. It is interesting that the Turks were divided among themselves but united against the Arabs—their common foe. Each year the *Dihqans* of Transoxiana would assemble and resolve to be united againt the Arabs. (Baladhuri, *Futuh ul-Buldan*, ed. M.J. De. Geogje, Lieden, 1866, p. 411; Yaqubi, *Tarikh*, Beirut, 1960, Vol. II, p. 237; See also: Barthold, *Turkistan Down to the Mongol Invasion*, London, 1958, p. 183; For more details of Turks' opposition to the Arabs see my article *Turkish Resistance Against the Arab Advances in Central Asia*, Bulletin of Islamic Studies, Aligarh, Vol. 23-25, 1991-92, pp. 85-112.
- 19. Among other measures, concerted efforts of preaching and propogating the new faith among the Turks, mosques were constructed at a large scale in the region, people were encouraged, by way of paying them financial assistance, for offering prayers. Arab Muslims were accommodated into the houses of local populace to teach them the Quran and other precepts of Islam. The *Shahristan* of Bukhara was divided among the Arabs and the local people to ensure the permanent settlement of the Arab Muslims that would ultimately help in securing the permanent conquest and creating a better understanding of Islam among the conquered people. For further details see: Narshakhi, Abu Bakr Muhammad, *Tarikhi-Bukhara*, Tehran, 1363, pp. 52-81; Also see my article: *Conquest and Islamisation of Bukhara*, Journal of Central Asian Studies, Srinagar, Vol. IV, 1993.

 A famous Turk Afshin was sent to crush the revolt of the heretic Babek in Azarbaijan in about 830 A.D. while a little later an Ikhshid was sent by the Caliph to be the autnomous governor of Egypt. (Cahen, op.cit, p.6)

Gardizi has devoted a full chapter to the history of different Turkish groups (Gardizi. Ab. Hay bin Duhaq, Zainnul-Akhbar, Tehran, 1347, p. 255ff, See also: Bosworth, op.cit, p. 4.

 Al-Tha'alibi, Lata'if ul-Ma'arif' tr. C.E. Bosworth, "The Book of Curious and Entertaining Information" Edingburg, 1968, p. 102.

23. Ayalon, D, "Aspects of Mamluk Phenomenon", Der Islam, 1976, pp. 202-4; Frye. R.N. "The Golden Age of Persian: The Arabs in the East, London, 1975, p. 214.

- 24. Barthold, V.V., Four Studies on the History of Central Asia, tr. Vol.III, Leiden, 1962, p. 9.
- Bosworth C.E., "The Ghaznavids: Their Empire in Afghanistan and Eastern Iran, Edinburg 1963, p. 100.
- 26. Ibid.
- Nazim, Muhammad, "The Life and Times of Sultan Mahmud of Ghazna, Cambridge, 1931 New Delhi, (Reprint), 1971, p. 28.
- 28. Bosworth, op.cit, p.6; Also see: Encyclopaedia of Islam, Ist edn, art. "Khazars".
- The whole of Transloxiana was considered a ferry point of international trade. Bukhara wa known also as Madinat us-Sufriyah (copper city) or "Madin at ut-Tujjar (The city of merchants)— Narshakhi, op. cit, p. 29.
- 30. Paykand was known as 'Bronze' city "Sharistan-Rauieen"

اهل بيكند جمله بازگانان بودند، و بازرگانی چين ودريا كردندي د بنايت توانگر بوده اند'' (Narsharki, op.cit, p. 26.)

- 31. Bosworth, op. cit, p. 6.
- 32. Bregel, op. cit. pp. 56-57.
- 33. Abbas Parvez Tārīkh-i-Salajiga wa Khawārzamshahān, Tehran, 1930, p. 98.
- Rawandi, "Râhat us Sadur wa Ayat us Surūr", ed. Muhammad Iqbal, G.M.S. London 1921, p. 92.
- 35. Gardizi, op. cit., p. 192.
- 36. Bregel op. cit, p. 58.
- Lambton, A.K.S, "Some Aspects of Saljuqs Ghuzz Settlement" in D.S Richards op cit, p 124.
- 38. Gardizi, op. cit, p. 189.
- 39. Bregel, op.cit, p. 67.
- 40. Jahiz, Abu Uthman Amr bin al-Bahr, "رسالة في مناقب الاتراك" Eng. tr. by C.T. Harely Walker J.R.A.S, London, 1915, pp. 636 ff.
- 41. The Gold Mountain (*Chin Shan*) where they worked had the shape of a helmet which in their language was called *Turk*. This is why these people adopted this name. The fact however remains that no valid scholarly explaination of this popular etymology has yet been proposed (Sinor, Denis, op. cit, pp. 295-96).
- 42. Bregel, op. cit, p. 67.
- 43. Bregel, "The Role of Central Asia in the History of the Muslim East", The Asia Society Afghanistan Council, occasional paper: No. 20, New York, 1980, pp. 7-8.