

Ahmed Shah Durrani (011048) THREE

Afghanistan (010696)

Ahmad Shah and the Durrani Empire, 1747-72

An ordinary monarch might endeavour to reduce the tribes to obedience by force; but one Afghaun King has already had the penetration to discover that it would require a less exertion to conquer all the neighbouring kingdoms, than to subdue his own countrymen.

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AHMAD SHAH SADDOZAI was in his mid-twenties when he became *padshah*, or king, but neither he nor any of the tribal council had any experience of governing a state. Ahmad Shah's solution was to adopt and adapt the Safavid models of administration and elements of the Mughal government of Multan.² Ahmad Shah's vision of kingship too derived from the absolutist Safavid model. In the case of the Durrani monarchy, however, it was the Sunni branch of Islam rather than Shi'ism which became the state cult of the kingdom.

Ahmad Shah 'Abdali's administration: conflicts and competition

From the very outset of Ahmad Shah's reign there were conflicts within the government about the rights and privileges of the king, tensions that were never satisfactorily resolved and eventually contributed to the break-up of his kingdom. Sixty years after Ahmad Shah's accession, the Elphinstone Mission noted that:

there is some distinction of interests between the King and the nation, and a still greater difference of opinion regarding his legal powers; the King, the Courtiers, and the Moolahs, maintaining that he has all the authority possessed by Asiatic despots; and the people in the tribes considering him a monarch with very limited prerogatives. This produces a good deal of diversity in the actual exercise of the royal authority.³

The king's military-tribal council, or *majlis*, while based on the Mughal and Safavid *malik* model, differed inasmuch as the *maliks* were now located at the heart of the state, rather than on the periphery, for the 'Abdali tribal council acted to a degree as the king's Cabinet. Since Ahmad Shah was obligated to these individuals and had agreed that their offices were hereditary, it made it extremely difficult for him to dismiss any member of the *jirga* without precipitating a rebellion. Their roles, however, were mostly honorific, for responsibilities for the performance of the duties of their offices were delegated to subordinates, usually members of their own extended family, or *qaum*. As for the civil service, it was almost exclusively in the hands of the Qizilbash, since most of the Durrani leaders were illiterate. The Qizilbash also formed the majority of the king's *ghulam khana*, or royal guard, and acted as a counterpoise to the 'Abdali *maliks* and tribal *khans*. These complex and competing layers of government undermined effective administration, encouraged graft and contributed significantly to ethnic and sectarian tension, particularly between the Shi'a Qizilbash and members of the king's tribal council.

Another serious problem in the hastily constructed Durrani administration was Ahmad Shah's agreement to exempt the 'Abdali *maliks* and their tribes from civil and religious taxation, an exemption that was another source of tension between them and the king, especially when the treasury was empty. Other Afghan tribes and ethnic groups resented this privileged arrangement for they had to bear the burden of taxation, yet were excluded from access to high office and state patronage. The situation was not improved by Ahmad Shah adopting the tradition of auctioning the right to revenue collection to the highest bidder, an arrangement similar to the *zamindari* system in Mughal India or the Roman 'publican' one in New Testament Judaea. The winners of these auctions had a free hand to extract as much revenue as they could, provided they paid the contracted sum into the treasury. Since it was usually members of the 'Abdali tribe who won the bidding war, this was yet another source of resentment against the tribe, a bitterness exacerbated by the notorious venality of the tax gatherers who had no qualms about resorting to violence. Though their rapacity made them very rich very quickly, their exactions forced thousands of small landholders into permanent debt. Many ended up having to mortgage the land or sell up, while others fled the kingdom altogether, leaving their land to be snapped up by the very individuals who had forced them into penury and exile in the first place.

Ahmad Shah, though, was not particularly concerned about this state of affairs, for he was far more preoccupied with emulating his mentor,