

Unit-I

d) Ulema: Emergence and Role

Scope of the Topic: These notes explain the emergence, social background, functions, political influence, limitations, and changing position of the ulema from the establishment of the Delhi Sultanate to the first half of the sixteenth century. The term refers broadly to Muslim religious scholars and learned specialists, not to a single unified political organisation.

1. Meaning and Basic Concept of Ulema

- Ulema (singular: alim) literally denotes learned persons, especially those trained in Islamic religious sciences.
- In medieval India, the ulema generally included scholars of the Quran, Hadith, Islamic jurisprudence (fiqh), theology, Arabic and Persian learning, and related branches of knowledge.
- They were an important section of the educated Muslim population, but the ulema were not a homogeneous class: their social status, wealth, political influence, and degree of closeness to the ruling court varied considerably.
- The most important distinction is between the ulema as a learned religious community and the narrower group of court-appointed religious officials who directly served the state.
- Their influence was strongest in institutions connected with law, justice, education, religious endowments, and public morality, although individual rulers could expand or restrict their political influence.

2. Historical Background: Why the Ulema Emerged in India

- The expansion of Muslim political power in North India from the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries created a new environment for religious scholars.
- The Delhi Sultanate required personnel who could interpret Islamic law, conduct judicial work, manage religious endowments, teach in madrasas, and advise rulers.
- Muslim migration from Central Asia, Khurasan, Afghanistan, Iran and other regions brought scholars, jurists, Sufis, administrators and literati into the subcontinent.
- The establishment of mosques, madrasas, khanqahs and charitable endowments strengthened the institutional basis of Muslim learning.
- Persian became the principal language of administration and high culture under the Sultanate, while Arabic remained central to advanced Islamic religious scholarship.
- The Indian environment also required adaptation: the ulema interacted with a socially diverse population in which Muslims were a minority for much of the Sultanate period.

3. Social Composition and Sources of Recruitment

- Many prominent ulema were migrants or descendants of migrants who came from the wider Islamic world and settled in Indian towns.

- Indian-born Muslims increasingly entered the learned professions, particularly as urban institutions of education expanded.
- Some members of ruling and administrative families pursued religious scholarship and acquired scholarly prestige.
- Madrasas served as important centres for training future scholars, judges and teachers.
- Religious endowments (waqf) provided material support for mosques, madrasas, shrines and scholars.
- The growth of towns such as Delhi, Lahore, Multan, Uch, Ajodhan, Lakhnauti, Jaunpur and other regional centres widened the geographical network of Islamic learning.

4. Institutional Bases of Ulema Influence

4.1 Madrasa

- Madrasas were important centres of formal learning in Islamic religious and literary traditions.
- Instruction could include Quranic studies, Hadith, jurisprudence, theology, Arabic grammar, logic and other scholarly disciplines, with the curriculum varying by institution and period.
- Madrasas helped reproduce a learned class by training teachers, jurists and religious officials.

4.2 Mosque

- Mosques were places of worship but also centres of instruction and community life.
- The khatib (preacher) and imam could have social influence through sermons, teaching and ritual functions.

4.3 Waqf and Religious Endowments

- Waqf endowed property for religious, educational or charitable purposes.
- Such endowments created a relatively stable material foundation for institutions associated with the ulema.
- Control over endowments could also connect scholars to the political authority because rulers and officials were often involved in granting, confirming or supervising them.

4.4 Court and Judicial Offices

- The state appointed religious scholars to important judicial and ecclesiastical posts.
- The Qazi functioned as a judge in matters governed by Islamic law, while higher judicial offices could coordinate or supervise provincial judicial personnel.
- The office of Sadr was connected with religious grants, charitable endowments and matters concerning the religious establishment; its precise scope varied over time.

5. Emergence of the Ulema under the Delhi Sultanate

5.1 Early Delhi Sultanate: Iltutmish and the Foundations of the Relationship

- Under Iltutmish, the Delhi Sultanate developed more stable administrative institutions, creating greater space for learned religious personnel.
- Scholars and jurists received patronage from rulers and nobles, and the court became an important place for intellectual and religious interaction.
- The recognition of Delhi as a major centre of Muslim political power increased its attraction for scholars from other regions.
- The relationship between ruler and ulema was based partly on mutual benefit: rulers gained religious legitimacy and specialist services, while scholars received patronage, offices and institutional support.

5.2 The Ulema and the Question of Political Legitimacy

- Islamic political ideas gave importance to justice, the protection of religion, and the proper exercise of authority.
- The ulema could validate or criticise aspects of royal conduct through legal opinion, religious advice and public moral authority.
- In practice, however, Sultanate rulers were not simply controlled by the ulema. Political necessity, military demands, taxation, local conditions and the interests of the state often shaped policy.

Interpretive Perspective: A useful analytical point is that the relationship between the Sultan and the ulema should be understood as negotiation rather than simple domination by either side.

6. Major Roles of the Ulema

6.1 Judicial Role

- Ulema supplied personnel for the judicial system, especially as qazis.
- They interpreted Islamic jurisprudence in cases falling within their jurisdiction.
- They dealt with matters relating to marriage, divorce, inheritance, religious obligations and other issues where Muslim personal law or Islamic legal norms were relevant.
- Judicial authority was exercised within the Sultanate's plural social setting; customary practices and political authority could also affect the actual application of law.

6.2 Educational Role

- The ulema taught in madrasas, mosques and private scholarly circles.
- They trained future scholars, judges, teachers and religious functionaries.
- They helped transmit Arabic and Persian learning and preserved Islamic intellectual traditions in India.
- Their educational role contributed to the formation of an urban literate culture closely linked with the administration and elite society.

6.3 Religious and Ritual Role

- Ulema guided Muslim communities in religious practices and interpreted doctrinal and legal questions.
- Preachers and mosque officials shaped community norms through sermons and instruction.
- They participated in religious festivals, communal observances and the supervision of institutions connected with Islamic worship.

6.4 Administrative Role

- Scholars could occupy state offices involving law, education, religious grants and endowments.
- Their literacy in Arabic and Persian made some members valuable to a bureaucracy that depended heavily on written documentation.
- The overlap between religious learning and administrative competence enabled some ulema to become influential court officials.

6.5 Moral and Advisory Role

- Ulema could advise rulers on questions of justice, religion, taxation, public conduct and the treatment of Muslims.
- Their advice was not uniformly accepted; strong rulers could disregard scholars when state priorities differed from their preferences.
- Public moral criticism could become politically significant, especially when scholars had social prestige beyond the court.

6.6 Role in Religious Endowments and Charity

- Ulema frequently became associated with waqf institutions and charitable activities.
- Through endowments, institutions could support teaching, worship, poor relief and scholars.
- This function connected religious learning with the wider social economy of medieval towns.

7. Relationship between Ulema and the Sultan

- The Sultan needed the ulema for religious legitimacy, legal expertise and institutional administration.
- The ulema depended to varying degrees on royal and noble patronage for offices, stipends, grants and endowments.
- This relationship was therefore reciprocal but unequal.
- Powerful rulers could limit the autonomy of the religious establishment by selecting compliant officials or redefining the scope of state policy.
- At other times, influential ulema could resist policies perceived as incompatible with Islamic norms.
- The balance shifted according to the personality of the ruler, military and fiscal pressures, the political strength of nobles, and the broader social context.

8. Alauddin Khalji and the Relative Autonomy of State Policy

- Alauddin Khalji is especially important in discussions of the relationship between the state and the ulema.
- His fiscal and market regulations were motivated primarily by political and military considerations rather than by a simple attempt to reproduce the ideal prescriptions of religious jurists.
- The ruler famously differentiated between matters of governance and the technical opinions of religious scholars, showing that the Sultanate state could claim policy space beyond the direct control of the ulema.
- This should not be interpreted as hostility to Islam: Alauddin remained a Muslim ruler and continued to maintain relations with religious elites, but he asserted the priority of political necessity in statecraft.

Exam Focus: For exam answers: Alauddin's reign is a classic example of the distinction between shari'a-oriented scholarship and practical statecraft (zawabit or regulations of governance).

9. Muhammad bin Tughlaq: Scholarship, Intellectualism and State Control

- Muhammad bin Tughlaq was himself highly educated and had broad intellectual interests.
- His reign demonstrates that a learned ruler did not necessarily mean a ruler who surrendered political decision-making to the ulema.
- His policies could be bold, experimental and politically disruptive, sometimes producing tension with sections of the religious establishment.
- The experience of his reign illustrates the complex relationship between personal learning, religious authority and the practical demands of empire.

10. Firoz Shah Tughlaq: Greater Accommodation of the Ulema

- Firoz Shah Tughlaq is generally associated with a more supportive policy toward the orthodox religious establishment than Alauddin Khalji and Muhammad bin Tughlaq.
- He patronised madrasas, mosques and religious scholars and supported religious endowments.
- He sought the approval of religious authorities in matters of policy and presented himself as a more explicitly orthodox ruler.
- His reign therefore illustrates a different model of state-ulema relations in which religious scholars enjoyed greater public and institutional influence.
- At the same time, increased patronage also made the ulema more dependent on state-controlled resources.

11. Ziauddin Barani and the Idea of a Religiously Guided Sultanate

- Ziauddin Barani, a fourteenth-century Persian chronicler and political thinker, provides important evidence for elite attitudes toward the ulema and Islamic governance.

- His works reveal concern with social hierarchy, political order, the moral responsibilities of rulers and the relationship between Islam and kingship.
- Barani represents one strand of elite political thought rather than a neutral description of the whole society.
- His writings are therefore valuable both as evidence and as an ideological text that must be read critically.

12. Regional Centres and the Changing Position of Ulema

- The history of the ulema was not confined to Delhi.
- Regional sultanates developed their own scholarly networks, madrasas, mosques and centres of learning.
- Jaunpur became especially famous as a centre of Islamic scholarship and was later associated with the title "Shiraz of India" in traditional descriptions.
- Bengal, Gujarat, Malwa, Kashmir and the Deccan also produced important scholarly and religious communities.
- Regional courts often recruited scholars from Delhi and from the wider Persianate world, creating a network of knowledge across political boundaries.

13. Ulema and the Wider Muslim Society

- The ulema did not constitute the whole Muslim elite. Nobles, military commanders, Sufis, merchants, administrators and literati could have different interests.
- The ulema were closely connected to urban Muslim life through mosques, madrasas, courts and endowments.
- They contributed to the regulation of family and inheritance practices among Muslims.
- They also helped articulate ideas of legitimate conduct and communal identity.
- Their influence among non-Muslim populations was more limited and depended heavily on the specific institution and political context.

14. Ulema and Sufis: Difference and Interaction

- The ulema and Sufis should not be treated as identical groups.
- Ulema derived authority primarily from formal religious learning, jurisprudence and scholarly credentials; Sufi authority was often associated with spiritual discipline, personal charisma, lineage and relationships with disciples.
- There could be cooperation: Sufi institutions and learned scholars interacted in urban and rural settings.
- There could also be tension, particularly where Sufi practices were criticised by jurists as insufficiently orthodox or where charismatic authority competed with formal scholarship.
- In actual medieval society, the boundaries were porous: some individuals combined scholarly training with Sufi affiliations.

15. Ulema and Non-Muslim Subjects

- The Sultanate ruled over a religiously plural society dominated numerically by non-Muslims.

- Ulema contributed to debates concerning the status, taxation and treatment of non-Muslim subjects, especially through interpretations of Islamic legal traditions.
- The actual treatment of non-Muslims varied significantly between rulers, regions and historical circumstances.
- Administrative practice often reflected pragmatism, local custom and fiscal necessity in addition to religious norms.
- Therefore, historians should avoid presenting a single uniform "ulema policy" toward non-Muslims for the entire 1206-mid-sixteenth-century period.

16. Ulema and Social Control

- The ulema helped define acceptable behaviour through sermons, legal opinions, teaching and judicial practices.
- They could reinforce patriarchal norms in matters of family, marriage and inheritance within Muslim communities.
- They contributed to the maintenance of religious boundaries and communal identity.
- Their influence was greatest where the state, urban institutions and Muslim community organisations overlapped.

17. Limits to the Power of the Ulema

- The ulema did not control the Sultanate state as a collective body.
- The Sultan possessed military power, revenue resources and administrative authority that could override scholarly objections.
- Political fragmentation meant that different rulers and regional states maintained different relationships with scholars.
- The ulema competed with nobles, Sufis and other intellectual groups for influence and patronage.
- Within the ulema themselves, differences of legal school, scholarly interpretation, regional background and political loyalty reduced unity.
- Royal patronage could make prominent scholars dependent on rulers, limiting independent opposition.

18. Continuities and Changes up to the Mid-Sixteenth Century

- From the thirteenth century onward, the institutional presence of the ulema became increasingly embedded in courts, judicial offices, educational centres and religious endowments.
- The political importance of the ulema rose or fell depending on the ruler and the nature of the state.
- The Lodis inherited and modified many earlier Sultanate institutions; scholarly and religious networks continued to operate across North India.
- The establishment of Mughal rule in the early sixteenth century did not abolish the existing learned class. Rather, the Mughal political order incorporated many established scholarly institutions while developing new networks of patronage.

- By the mid-sixteenth century, the ulema remained a significant component of the religious and intellectual elite, but they operated alongside Sufis, nobles, administrators, literati and regional scholarly communities.

19. Socio-Economic Importance of the Ulema

- The ulema formed part of the urban service and learned elite whose livelihood could depend on salaries, grants, endowments, teaching and judicial office.
- Waqf and state grants helped channel surplus resources into religious and educational institutions.
- Madrasas created employment for teachers and support staff and sustained networks of students.
- The presence of mosques, madrasas and endowments contributed to the growth of urban neighbourhoods and service economies.
- Religious patronage also strengthened the social prestige of rulers and elites by allowing them to present themselves as protectors of learning and charity.

20. Key Terms for Students

Term	Meaning / significance
Ulema / Alim	Religious scholars; alim is the singular form.
Qazi	Judge, generally appointed to adjudicate according to applicable Islamic legal principles.
Sadr	Senior official associated with religious grants, charitable endowments and the religious establishment; functions varied by period.
Mufti	Scholar qualified to issue a legal opinion (fatwa).
Fatwa	A considered legal opinion issued by a qualified jurist; not automatically identical to a state order.
Madrasa	Institution of advanced learning, especially associated with Islamic sciences.
Waqf	Permanent religious/charitable endowment of property or resources.
Khatib	Person who delivers the Friday sermon (khutba) in a mosque.

Term	Meaning / significance
Fiqh	Human understanding and interpretation of Islamic jurisprudence.
Shari'a	The normative Islamic legal-religious tradition; its interpretation in practice varied by jurists and contexts.
Zawabit	State regulations or administrative rules formulated by rulers for governance, often discussed in contrast with purely juristic prescriptions.

21. Chronological Snapshot

Period	Broad development
13th century	Institutionalisation of the Delhi Sultanate; growth of madrasas, mosques, judicial offices and learned networks.
Iltutmish	Expansion of a stable Sultanate framework; growing incorporation of scholars and jurists into court and religious institutions.
Alauddin Khalji	Strong assertion of statecraft and practical governance; illustrates limits on direct political control by ulema.
Muhammad bin Tughlaq	Highly learned ruler; complex interaction between intellectual culture, state policy and religious elites.
Firoz Shah Tughlaq	Greater patronage of ulema, madrasas and religious endowments; stronger public accommodation of orthodoxy.
Lodi period	Continued importance of scholars and regional centres such as Jaunpur; persistence of Sultanate learned networks.
Early Mughal period to mid-16th century	Older scholarly institutions continued while Mughal patronage and administrative structures began reshaping the learned elite.

22. Critical Assessment

- The ulema were neither merely passive servants of the state nor an independent governing class.
- Their authority came from scholarship, law, education, institutional position and social prestige.
- Their influence became stronger when rulers sought religious legitimacy and material patronage, and weaker when politically powerful rulers prioritised pragmatic governance.
- The ulema were internally diverse, and their relationship with Sufis, nobles and rulers could range from cooperation to competition.
- Their historical significance lies not only in theology but also in the development of institutions of law, education, urban culture, charitable endowment and political legitimacy.
- A balanced interpretation therefore places the ulema within the wider social structure of the Sultanate rather than treating them as a separate, all-powerful religious bloc.

23. Very Short Revision Points

- Ulema = learned Muslim scholars; alim = singular.
- Important functions: judicial, educational, religious, advisory and administrative.
- Key institutions: madrasa, mosque, waqf, qazi and sadr offices.
- Patronage connected ulema with rulers, but did not make the group politically omnipotent.
- Alauddin Khalji illustrates strong state autonomy in practical governance.
- Firoz Shah Tughlaq represents stronger accommodation of orthodox religious scholars.
- Barani is both a historical source and an ideological thinker; his views require critical reading.
- Ulema and Sufis were distinct but sometimes overlapping groups.
- Regional centres such as Jaunpur broadened the geography of Islamic scholarship.
- The ulema remained influential into the early Mughal period, though their precise power changed with political conditions.