Saljuq Sultanate: A Brief Survey

The Saljuqs made their appearance in the history and their power rose on the wreck of the Ghaznavids. The role of Mahmud Ghaznavi is highly important in aiding Saljuqs to emerge in the history. Saljuqs are said to be Turks who migrated from the Khirgiz Steppes of Turkistan to Transoxiana (Bukhara) and they settled and accepted Islam there. Here the role played by Sultan Mahmud Ghaznavi seems to be highly important; he permitted them to settle in that region while receiving tributes from them. These people came to be known in the history as Saljuqs after their leader’s name. Slowly but surely, Saljuq and after him his descendants established and cemented their power through the realms of the Samanids. Sultan Mahmud who died in 1030 C.E. was succeeded by his son Mas‘ud. He toiled hard to remove the redoubtable subjects, but failed. In a famous battle that took place near Hirat, Mas‘ud was vanquished, thus increasing the power of the Saljuqs. After Sultan Mas‘ud’s defeat, Saljuqs nominated Tughril Beg– a grandson of chieftain Saljuq as their leader. Tughril Beg along with his brother ventured as far as Khurasan. In 1037 C.E., the combined efforts of these two brothers helped them to get the occupation of Marw and Naysabur from the clutches of the Ghaznavids. The leader, Tughril Beg very rapidly brought under his sway Balkh, Jurjan, Hamdhan, Tabaristan, Khwarizm and other strategic regions like Isbahan.

Whilst the power of Tughril Beg was eclipsing that of the Buwayhids in Persia, the Abbasid caliph Qadir bi Allah breathed his last. On his death, his son Abu Ja‘far ‘Abd Allah was installed on the throne with the title of al-Qaim. At this very juncture, Tughril Beg stood at the environs of Baghdad. In a way by compulsion, caliph Qaim received the Saljuq ruler as a deliverer. Qaim took his seat on a platform behind a curtain, which was lifted at the approach of Tughril Beg. He sat on an adjoining platform and the caliph made him regent of the empire and showered him the title of al-Sultan.

Arsalan al-Basasiri, a Turkish chief seized the power and replaced the Buwayhid ruler from the office of Amir al-Umra of the palace. Tughril Beg went for an expedition, to this al-Basasiri took the advantage of his temporary absence, and occupied the capital by compelling al-Qaim to sign a document renouncing his rights in favor of Fatimids (ruled at that time by by al-Muntansir 1035-1094 C.E.) of Cairo. The emblems of the caliphate were sent to Egypt like mantle, sceptre, pulpit, etc and prayers were recited in the name of Fatimids in the Masajid of Iraq. Tughril Beg
on hearing this news, hurried back to Baghdad, defeated and killed al-Basasiri and reinstated caliph al-Qaim on the throne in 1060 C.E. The Daylamite troops were disbanded and the Buwayhid game ended forever.

Under the leadership of Tughril Beg, Saljuqs became the dominant force in Asia. The history and the story of the Saljuqs was not somewhat extraordinary event in the history of Islam as their cousins – the Mongols and the Ottoman Turks displayed the same process. All these tribes – Saljuqs, Mongols and Ottomans belonged to the same stock, but the Saljuqs proved themselves to be the most advanced and also followed Islam with high zeal, religious fervor and enthusiasm. They kept themselves busy in the expansion of the power of Islam. The most glorious epoch in the history of the Saljuqs was in the latter half of the eleventh century Christian era.

It was the period of the weakness of the Abbasid caliphate and the Greeks has utilized this opportunity positively. They again revisited to their former policy of conducting raids which culminating into the attempts at conquest, making it evident that at the end of the tenth century Christian era, the Byzantines had extended their control as far as Antioch to the south and the boundaries of Armenia Proper to the east. It was at the same famous Saljuq sultan Tughril Beg who in the year 1060 C.E. raised war against the Byzantines and ousted them from the regions of Cappadocia and Phyrgia, but the most brilliant victories and permanent conquest of these regions was reserved for the next ruler – Alp Arsalan.

On the death of Tughril Beg in 1063 C.E., Alp Arsalan, his nephew succeeded him to the throne. He received from the caliph the title of Azd al-Dawlah and was called as “Valiant Lion”. Alp Arsalan occupied in the very second year of his power Aani – the capital of Christian Armenia, and Georgia – then a Byzantine province. After these victories, Alp Arsalan retired to Khoi, in Azerbayjan, from there he received the news that Emperor Romanus Diogenes along a huge army had invaded the Asia Minor with an intention of bringing destruction to the Baghdad and reducing the whole of Western Asia under the Roman sway. It was probably for the first time that the Constantinople had issued such an equipped, well trained and huge army for plunder and conquest.
Romanus Diogenes with his army advanced and finally had one to one with the Muslim army at a place called Malazkird or Malasjird in 1071 C.E. It was a decisive battle in which an inflicting defeat was given to the Romans after a desperate and prolonged fight. Romanus Diogenes was taken as prisoner and carried to the camp of Sultan Alp Arsalan, who by his magnanimity treated him with great honour and kindness. After negotiations a peace treaty was concluded between Alp Arsalan and Romanus, who agreed to pay a ransom of a million and an annual tribute of three hundred and sixty thousand pieces of gold and release of all the prisoners of the war.

Saljuqs proved to be the first Muslim power to establish a permanent footing in the land of the Romans and henceforth changed the whole Asia Minor into the Abode of Islam. After permanent footing in Asia Minor, cousin of Alp Arsalan namely Sulayman ibn Qutlumish was bestowed with the charge of this new territory, afterwards he established there in 1077 C.E. Rum Sultanate. The place Nicae (Niqiyah) became the first capital of this Sultanate and it remained so until the hordes of the first Crusade drove out Qilij Arsalan – son and successor of Sulayman from this place. The capture of this city by the crusaders resulted in removing the seat of government to Iconium (Quniyah) in 1084 C.E. It was one of the most attractive and beautiful Byzantine cities in Asia Minor.

The great ruler of Saljuqs, Alp Arsalan died due to a wound inflicted by a rebel. His rule was purely progressive, fruitful and just. Alp Arsalan was himself the man of great caliber and had developed highest degree of morals. Ibn al-Athir describes him as a noble, benevolent, just and wiser ruler, pure, pious and devout in his life; humane of heart, charitable, and a friend of poor; never indulging in anything reprehensible, and with all brave and chivalrous. He had in his reign highest capable and devoted officials like wazir Khwaja Hasan, prominently known by the name – Nizam al-Mulk.

It should be also noted that the first two sultans of the Saljuqs did not live in Baghdad; rather they exercised their rule through resident. Alp Arsalan’s capital and seat of government was Isbahan; while Marw and al-Rayy were the seats of his predecessor. It was not until the expiry of the year 1091 C.E., that the Saljuqs transferred the seat of government to the capital of the Caliphs (Baghdad).
After Alp Arsalan, his son Jalal al-Din Malik Shah was invested with the sultanate in 1073 C.E. under the title of Jalal al-Dawlah (Glory of the Empire). Malik Shah’s reign proved the one under which Saljuqian power reached its prime. At the very outset of his reign some insurrections were raised, and one insurrection was manipulated by his own brother. The event that took place at Tus shows the character of the Sultan Malik Shah. He made devotions to Allah, in that he prayed give victory to his brother if he is more suited and worthy than himself to rule over the Muslims.

Malik Shah’s domain was so much vast that it extended in length from Kashgar – a place at the extreme end of the land of the Turks to Jerusalem, and in the width from Constantinople to the Caspian Sea. It can be correctly put that Malik Shah was more than a ruler of such an extensive empire. His benevolent rule enlightened the whole empire with peace, prosperity and progress as Amir Ali calls him, “wise, noble and just” and also his fame as a rule has been equalled by few sovereign. He devoted much of his time in the construction of roads, building of Masajid and also digging of canals for irrigation and agricultural purposes. It is also written in the history that all the roads of his empire were safe not only for the caravans but also for the people numbering few, to travel peacefully and without any special protection from Transoxania to Syria. The credit of introducing sanitary systems in Baghdad is given to the Abbasid caliph al-Muqtadi, but these systems were more likely initiated by the Saljuqian Sultan Malik Shah. This system made the diversion of dirty water of the public bath from the Tigris into special cesspools.

The glory that Malik Shah and even Alp Arsalan possessed would have been aptly impossible without the presence of the illustrious Persion wazir, Nizam al-Mulk. There can be no doubt at all that after Yahya Barmaki, Nizam al-Mulk was the most able administrator that Asia produced. He served the empire in the reign of Alp Arsalan with high devotion and total sincerity, thus being one of the reasons that Sultan Malik Shah retained him in the office. Malik Shah ruled for about twenty years (1072-1092) and in his full reign whole authority rested into the hands of Nizam al-Mulk. Thus Sultan had nothing to do but to sit on the throne and enjoy his chase and that is why P.K. Hitti calls Nizam al-Mulk as, “one of the ornaments of the political history of Islam.”
How Nizam al-Mulk ran the affairs of the state and administered different institutions itself presents an enduring monument of his caliber and capacity. Nizam al-Mulk – the benevolent, highly cultured and wise; devoted most of his energies to the welfare and prosperity of the empire. He regularly made extensive tours in the empire so as to examine the conditions of the people and accordingly provided different requirements necessary for relieving their sufferings. It was only due to his earnest efforts, different roads and canals were constructed and also different hospitals, madrasahs and colleges were established. An encouragement and patronage was also given to the agricultural activities and also to industry and commerce, leading the empire towards peace, tranquility and progress.

Nizam al-Mulk was himself a cultured scholar and a learned man, thus he made tremendous contribution to the development of the literature not only by providing patronage but by the pen as well. We have from his pen the most remarkable and famous work – *Siyasat Namah* (a valuable an important work on the art of government). However his sole glory and fame rests on the establishment of the first well organized and worldwide famous *Nizamiyyah Madrash* in 1065 C.E. in Baghdad and also other academics for higher education. These activities itself speak of his keen interest and zeal toward literary activities. It was also because of the suggestions of Nizam al-Mulk that he reformed the Persian calendar, when in 1074-1075 C.E. he called a conference of the astronomers at his newly erected observatory. Its result was the calendar known as *Jalali Calendar* after the name of Jalal al-Din Malik Shah. The modern scholars describe this calendar as “somewhat more accurate than ours.”

Towards the expiry of the reign of Malik Shah, the Assassins (Nihlists of Islam) appeared who had established a fraternity founded by Hasan Sabah. He followed the Fatimid caliphs of the Egypt, who gave him the authority to make proselytes to the Isma‘iliya doctrines. The earliest and most prominent victim of these Assassins became Nizam al-Mulk. His death in 1092 C.E. brought an end to to the glory of the reign of the first three Sultans. His death in the next year was followed Malik Shah, who aged thirty-nine. After his death, civil wars broke among his sons on the matter of succession and also subsequent circumstances too accounted for the decline and downfall of the power of Slajuqs. It may also be noted that the period also witnessed the war popularly known as Crusades launched by Christians against the Muslims in the Western Asia.