

Price Regulation Scheme of Alauddin Khalji

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Perhaps the most important and most widely debated scheme of Alauddin was his Market Control Policy also known as price regulation scheme. The Market Control Policy of Alauddin is unique in the sense that through it for the first time in the history of India, a monarch tried to introduce state control in the economic activities of the people. The measure of success Alauddin was able to achieve in the control of the prices of different commodities is remarkable. K.S. Lal is of the opinion that this measure was guided by military considerations the specific purpose being “to maintain a large army at a small cost.” Alauddin’s period was that of continual war. He needed a strong army to cope with the situation. After the prestigious siege of Chittor and the Mongol invasion of Delhi (1303), Alauddin made up his mind, therefore, to recruit a permanent army ‘not only large’ but, well-armed, with archers, and all ready for immediate service.¹ For strengthening the army a number of steps such as branding of horses-‘dagh’ and maintenance of descriptive roles-‘Chehra’ or ‘hulia’ were undertaken. The Sultan also wanted that the essential commodities that the soldier needed for their daily use were well within their means to buy. The sagacious advisers of the Sultan explained that, “the necessaries of life would never become cheap until the price of grain was fixed by regulations and tariffs.”² It was to this end in view that the Sultan through his market control policy tried to maintain the prices at a certain fixed level. Alauddin Khalji, therefore, issued a number of economic regulations to determine the prices of various necessaries of life and ensure their regular supply to the people at fixed prices and without any inconvenience.³ Thus K.S. Lal feels that this policy was meant primarily for the soldier. It was to obviate any chances of dissatisfaction rising within the army. The contemporary historian Barani, also informs that Alauddin’s motive for implementing this scheme was to keep his soldiers contented, since he had already deprived them of the land-grants issued in lieu of military services and fixed cash salaries for them. It was apprehended that, in case the Sultan was called upon ‘to settle a large amount of pay on the army’ year after year, the royal treasury, which was full to the brim at that

time, would have exhausted within five or six years.⁴ After considerable deliberation, he introduced a salary structure in conformity with a dignified standard of living of the various categories of the soldiers. The salary of a foot soldier was fixed at 78 tankas per annum,⁵ while a horseman, who was provided with a horse by the state, got double the amount, i.e., 156 tankas. Fixation of salaries made necessary the fixation of prices as well.

U.N. Dey feels that this policy was an anti-inflammatory measure. The Sultan was anxious to save the state economy from the vicious circle of inflation and price rise. Alauddin had lavishly distributed gold and silver among the people of Delhi at the time of his accession. As a result prices began to rise high causing suffering to poor people. To relieve them of the pressure of inflation, Alauddin introduced the market control policy. Alauddin felt that if he could alleviate the sufferings of the poorer section of his subjects. If he could overcome their penury and raise them above subsistence level, he would aim their gratitude and could gain popularity. This would considerably strengthen his rule. U.N. Dey writes- “in cheap bread Alauddin found the Chairman for a successful rule.” Alauddin had also deprived the nobles of quite a few of their powers and privileges. They, too, would lead a luxurious life on account of this measure. However, there is conclusive evidence in Barani’s Tarikh-i-Firozshahi to assert that the basic purpose of the scheme was to keep the soldiers contented with a fixed pay which in turn was necessary to cut down the expenditure on the army. Price control was unavoidable in these circumstances. I am personally of the opinion that the market control policy of the Sultan was a part of his entire political programme, not only meant for the benefit of the soldiers.

Nizami and Saxena point out that even if this scheme was meant only for the benefit of the soldiers, the soldiers were placed in a number of other places besides Delhi. It was hardly prudent on the part of the policy maker, if all the soldiers, who were equally paid were treated differently on this. Secondly, had the scheme been only limited to

Delhi it would have led to a practical problem. The traders would have avoided coming to Delhi with their goods as they could earn better profits by selling their goods in other parts of the country where the price control policy was not introduced. Some compulsion would have been needed on the part of the government to bring traders to Delhi. There has been no mention of any such steps being taken by the Sultan. So it is more probable that this scheme of price control had been functioning in other cities also. Due to lack of communication and difficulty of transport in those days it would have been difficult to maintain price control in all the cities. But some cities at least must have come under the area of this scheme. U.N. Dey writes, that if the measure was not taken to bring inflation under control, it must have been limited to the capital only because Alauddin had distributed wealth lavishly here.

To make available grains for Mandi, Alauddin ordered collection of state revenue in the Doab region in kinds. Besides, the peasants were to sell their share of the produce which was surplus of their needs to the state officers at a fixed rate. The fixation of prices was not done by the Sultan arbitrarily, nor was his price structure based on the fluctuating supply and demand, good or bad weather or the speculative trends of the business community. Instead, Alauddin Khalji fixed the price of goods on the progressive principle of 'production cost' (bar award).⁶ In this manner he was able to provide grains for the Mandi which was taken there by the banjaras. No private hoarding of grain was to be tolerated. Only license holding shopkeepers could deal in grain. The merchants were registered and issued licenses to bring grain from the far-off villages. The provincial and local revenue officials helped them in the procurement of grain at fixed rates. Some of the Caravans did not abide by the government regulations. Barani records that the head of such Caravans were brought in chains before the shahna-i-Mandi and kept in confinement until they agreed upon one common mode of action and gave bail for each other.⁸ As a result, so much grain found its way into the markets that in normal times, it was unnecessary to open royal stores.⁹ The fifth regulation provided for securing the cheapness of grain against regrating (ihtikar)- 'buying and hoarding of goods with a view to retailing at a profit'. The regrated grain if discovered, was forfeited to the state and the regrator was fined.¹⁰

The land revenue from the Khalsa villages was realized in kind (regulation 8). The first eight regulations dealt with corn and cereals. The first regulation (zabita) fixed the price per maund of

wheat at 7.5 jitals,¹¹ barley at 4 jitals, while cereals like mash and mukhud were to sell at 5 jitals and moth at 3 jitals per maund. Barani also gives us a list of prices for various items. A few examples would include wheat at the rate of $7\frac{1}{2}$ jitals per maund Rice at the rate of 5 jitals 1 mound, gram at the rate of 5 jitals per maund etc.

Alauddin appointed Malik Qabul an intelligent and trust-worthy servant of Ulugh Khan to be the controller of all the grain markets, called Shahna-i-mandi¹². The Sultan received the daily reports regarding the market rate and the transaction of goods from three distinct sources – the controllers of the market, the barids and the munshis¹³. According to Barani's testimony, the specified scales of prices were maintained as long as Alauddin lived, irrespective of whether the rains were abundant or scanty. The unvarying prices of grain in the market was looked upon as one of the wonders of the time.¹⁴ He narrates an incident that, during a season of drought, a junior Shahna (not Malik Qabul) of a market, once or twice reported that the price of grain had risen half a jital, and he received twenty blows with the stick¹⁵. Firishta observes, however, that- "The prices remained fixed during this reign; in consequence of a want of water, a dearth ensued, and a difference took place in practice. It is difficult to conceive how so extraordinary a project should have been in practice, without defeating its own end. Such a plan was neither before ever carried into effect, or (sic) has it been tried since; but it is confidently asserted that the orders continued throughout the reign of this monarch¹⁶. The Sultan maintained a buffer stock in government houses to tide over periods of crop failure. At the time of famine grains were sold to the people on rationing basis. The eight regulation provided for the rationing of grain in times of drought or famine. Of course, there were seasons of drought and shortages, but we do not hear of any large scale famine and deaths by starvation during the reign of Alauddin. Barani is fully justified to remark 'this was indeed the wonder of the age; and no other monarch was able to affect it'¹⁷. If in times of scarcity, 'any poor, reduced person', went to the market and did not get his requirement, the official in charge of the market was taken to task whenever the Sultan came to know of it.¹⁸ The second set of regulations were issued by the Sultan for the purpose of securing low prices for cloth and groceries.¹⁹ In the cloth market, Alauddin fixed the prices of cotton cloth and introduced a sort of subsidized trade in silk clothes, appointing the Multani merchants as state agents who received a commission for the silk sold in the market. The loss incurred by them in the

trade was borne by the state. Such silk could be sold in the market only on a permit issued by the Sadr-i-Riyasat.

The coarse cloth and garments for common use were sold at the normal rates, based on the production-cost principle²⁰ albeit this was not the case with the superior qualities of cotton cloth, silks and other luxurious wear for the aristocracy. These goods were therefore, sold at subsidized rates for the benefit of the aristocracy²¹. Firishta also has it on record that the people were not permitted to wear superior garments and silks at home, except by special permission from the Sultan 'which favour was only granted to men of rank'²². Barani gives us a list of prices for various items. A few examples would include, silk clothes sold between 16 and 2 tankas, while cotton clothes sold between 36 and 6 Jitals. Like the corn dealers, the cloth merchants were also organized into a corporation; their names were registered in the office of the RaisParwana and they had to execute bonds to the effect that they would bring specified quantities of cloth, from wherever they could find, for sale in the capitals market. In the cloth market the Sultan could easily regulate the price of indigenous cloth. Amir Khusrau is all praise for them as they are said to have faced hardship in travelling to far-off countries and returning with fine products²³. IbnBatuta corroborates Khusrau when he says that the foreign merchants who had settled down in Delhi were advanced money by the state to supply choice goods from different countries. The merchant AbulHasan-al-Ibadi of Iraq used to trade with the Sultan's money and to buy weapons and goods for horse him in Iraq and Khurasan²⁴. Another merchant, Taj-al-Din-al-Kawlami who came from central Asia, was appointed the Governor of the port City of Cambay (Gujrat). He sent his vessels "to the towns of Mulaibar (Malabar), Island of Sailan and elsewhere, and valuable articles and gifts came to him in these vessels and he became enormously wealthy"²⁵. The Sultan and the members had craze for foreign goods and the merchants supplied these to the market in Delhi. The third set of regulations dealt with the sale and purchase of livestock-the horses and cattle, and slaves. In the market for horses and slaves, the price rise was generally due to the maneuvering of the broker. They provided food and lodging to the traders, with theirlivemerchandise and in reward charged extra money both from the merchants and the buyer. Firishta writes that a number of horse dealers, who defied the government regulations, were either put to death or whipped out of the capital²⁶. Barani's statement about the price of horses in Delhi sheds

light on the fact that it was sometimes difficult for people to distinguish between an imported horse, Tazi or Tatar and those reared in the Punjab or Roh, (the North-Western Frontier of Pakistan) called Hindi and the Baladasti (high -land horse)²⁷. Sultan AlauddinKhalji took severe measures to put an end to this fraud. Barari also informs us that as a result of the Sultan's measures, no horse dealer could pass off a hindi or Baladasti horse or a Tazi or Tatar on to a mounted archer²⁸. The price of the Hind or Baladasti horses fixed by Sultan AlauddinKhalji, ranged from sixty-five to seventy-five silver Tanker. The Sawars usually possessed these horses, and it was beyond their means to buy an imported horse on exorbitant price, running into hundreds or even thousands of Tankas²⁹. All the general markets of the Sultanate, fell within the preview of the Diwan-i-Riyasat-'the ministry of commerce'; the office nazir-'the superintendent of weights and measures' constituted a part of it. Alauddin activated this ministry by the appointment of Malik Yakub, the erstwhile nazir, as the Diwan-i-Riyasat. Shahnas were appointed for each market who supervised the sale of goods, inspected weight and measures and prevented the traders from floatingthe regulations framed by the King. All the Shahnas, including Malik Qabul, the controller of grain markets, and the RaisParwana, the in-charge of the cloth market of the capital, were put under the charge of Malik Yakub. Thus the Diwan-i-Riyasat was made ultimately responsible for the successful implementation of the economic regulations throughout the empire³⁰. Below theShahnas here were a number of Barids who checked prices, weights and measures and reported directly to the Sultan if there were any discrepancies. Another set of secret reporters called Munhiyanshelped in cross checking the reports submitted by the spies. Thus a very elaborate system of checks and balance was evolved to maintain the proper functioning of the market. Alauddin personally monitored the working of the scheme by sending slaves and minor children to the market for random purchases. Flogging and cutting of the flesh from the body were the penalties for over charging or under weighing. Barani writes: "The certainty of this punishment kept the traders honest, and restrained them from giving short weight, and other knavish tricks. Nay, they gave good weight that purchasers often got somewhat in excess"³¹. Thus Alauddin succeeded in ensuring a steady apply of essential goods into the market and this enabled him to keep the prices stable for the period of his reign. It was a remarkable success particularly in view of the fact that Alauddin was virtually an illiterate man and

with no knowledge of the mechanism of state controlled economy. Barani writes that Alauddin had “no acquaintance with learning”,³² but according to Firishta he learnt the art of reading Persian after his accession.

Barani argues that owing to the low wages, ordinary people did not benefit from the low prices. The famous saying went, ‘A canal sells for a dang (copper coin); but who has day?’³³ Recently Irfan Habit and Athar Abbas Rizvi have reiterated the earlier view. Habib supports Barani, and maintains that the fall in the prices led to a reduction of wages as well. As such the people were impoverished. Though the prices fell the purchasing capacity of the people did not really increased much. The state benefited in the sense that the state’s expenditure was minimized in those areas which fell under the price control measures. Rizvi also feels that information contained in KhairulMajalis attributing a philanthropic motive to Alauddin’s measure is not reliable. The actual effect of the price control measure was to accumulate treasures for the state. This was also the objective of other economic reforms introduced by Alauddin, the land revenue reforms. K.S. Lal has opined that the cause of discontinuance of the scheme after Alauddin can be traced in the fact that in the period of Mubarak Khalji military activities were at a low ebb. There was no major conquests, the tide of Mongol invasions had subsided. Hence the Sultan was not in a need of large army. Since the scheme was primarily meant to maintain a large army at low cost, Mubarak discontinued it.

REFERENCES:

- [1]. Barani, tarikh-i-FirozShahi, E & D III, p.191.
- [2]. Barani, Tarikh-i-FirozShahi, p. 192.
- [3]. Ibid, p. 192-97.
- [4]. Barani, Tarikh-i-FirzShahi, E & D III, p.191.
- [5]. A tanka was equivalent to the silver rupee of the Mughal Period: it was one tola in weight.
- [6]. Mohammad Habbib& Dr. (Mrs.) Afsar Khan, The political Theory of the Delhi Sultanate (being the Eng. Trs. Of Fatawa-i-Jahandariof Barani), KitabMahal, Allahabad, p.35.
- [7]. Regulation 6.
- [8]. Barani, Tarikh-I-FirozShahi, p. 193-94.
- [9]. Ibid, p. 194.
- [10]. Ibid
- [11]. The tankas were of gold as well as silver. There 50 Jitals to a silver tanka; the Jital was a copper coin, the weight of which is not known. Some presume that it was also a tola in weight while the others hold that it weighed 1.75 tolas. If tanka is taken to be the medeavilequivalent of a modern rupee, a Jital was worth two paisa. The maund of the days of AlauddinKhalji, as mentioned by Barani, comprised 40 seers and each sear weighed 24 tolas.
- [12]. Regulation 2, Barani’s description of the regulations is defective because bedid not have the original documents at his disposal when he werote the narrative. He has discussed all the economic measures with special reference to Delhi alone though we have reason to believe that these economic regulations were made applicable to other parts of the Sultanate as well.
- [13]. Regulation 7.
- [14]. Barani, Tarikh, p. 192-93.
- [15]. Ibid, p. 195.
- [16]. Firishta(Briggs), I, p.202.
- [17]. Barani, Tarikh, p.195.
- [18]. Ibid.
- [19]. The price list of groceries for the capital included: Sugar Candy, one seer: 2 jitals; coarse gusgar (Shakar) one seer: I Jital; coarse sugar surkh (gur), one seer: 0.5 jital; lamp oil, 3 seers: 1 Jital; ghee, one geer; 0.5 jital; Salt, 5 seers: 1 Jital; onion & garlic, one seer: 1 Jital, Firishta (Briggs), I, p.204.
- [20]. The rates quoted by Brani are: Chadar (ordinary bed sheets): 10 jitals: long cloth, coarse, per 40 yards: 1 Tanka (silver); long cloth, fine, per 20 yards: 1 tanka (silver).
- [21]. Firishta, the celebrated author of Gulshan-i-Ibrahim a popular contemporary work on medieval Indian history, belonged to an aristocratic family from Persia; born in C. 1570 A.D.; he migratod to South India at his early youth and spent most of his life at the Nizamshahi Court of jAhmadnagar. Firishta gives a list of 15 different varities of the fine cloth and silks: many of these names have been lost and hence uncomparable with the modern stuff; they included among others, Cheer, Delhi, per piece: 16 Tankas, Cher, Kotla, per piece: 6 Tankas; Sillahuti, fine, per, piece: 4 tankas; Sillahuti, middling, per piece: 3 tankas; Kirpas, fine per 20 yards: 1 tanka. (Briggs), I, p.203.
- [22]. Firishta(Briggs),I,p.203
- [23]. Ijazo-i-Khusravi, (Newalkishore, Lucknow, 1876), Vol.4, p.141-42.
- [24]. The Travels of Ibn Battuta, Vol. 3, p.748.
- [25]. Ibid., Vol.3, p. 733-34.
- [26]. Frishta (Briggs), I, p. 204.

- [27]. Barani, also cited by Simon Digby in Warhorse and Elephant in the sultanate of Delhi, p. 41 see also perso-Arabic sources, Iqtidar H. Siddiqui, p.119.
- [28]. Cf. Iqtidar H. Siddiqui, Foreign Policy of Sultan Muhammad bin Tughlaq Shah, Islamic Culture, Hyderabad, Vol. LXII, No. 14, October 1988, p. (1-22), 21-22.
- [29]. Cf. I.H. Siddiqui, Perso-Arabic Sources on the conditions in the Sultanate of Delhi, New Delhi, 1992, p. 119.
- [30]. Barani's reference to the economic regulations in Fatawa-i-Jahandari supplements the account given by him in the Tarikh-i-FirozShahi. He writes: "The King should also know that every arrangement (naqsh) in the matter of buying and selling and price fixation, which he makes for his capital, will also appear in all his provinces. The officers and the raiyat of his country will accept it and follow it."-Fatawa-i-Jahandari p. 36.
- [31]. Barani, Fatawa-i-jahandari(Habib &Afsar), p.197.
- [32]. Barani, Elliot, Vol. III, p. 183.
- [33]. Barani, Tarikh-i-FirozShahi[140], 312.