

The Medieval India – The Delhi Sultanate

The Delhi Sultanate

By the 10th century, North India was politically fragmented with various kingdoms constantly at wars with each other. This created a political vacuum which was exploited by the Turks who established their rule in Delhi by the 12th century. In the next hundred years, they expanded their kingdom by conquering other Indian states.

The empire which ruled North India from AD 1206 to AD 1526 was known as the Delhi Sultanate because Delhi was their capital (the seat of their empire) and the kings were known as Sultans.

Sources

Literary Sources

- Several biographies, autobiographies, court histories, chronicles, accounts of foreign travellers and private correspondence give us information about the history of the Delhi Sultanate. List of some important works of the period:

Name of the work	Author/Writer
Tarikh-i-Firozshahi	Ziauddin Barni
Tarikh-i-Mubarakshahi	Yahya-bin-Ahmed
Tabaqat-i-Nasiri	Minhaj-us-Siraj
Khazain-ul-Futuh	Amir Khusrao
Tughlaqnama	Amir Khusrao
Prithvirajraso	Chand Bardai

- Tarikh-i-Firozshahi is an important work on medieval India. Written by Ziauddin Barni, it gives an account of the political, social and economic conditions prevailing in India during those times.
- Prithvirajraso is an epic poem written by Chand Bardai. The poem narrates the heroic exploits of Prithviraj Chauhan who ruled Ajmer and Delhi from AD 1165 to AD 1192. It gives us glimpses of the socio-political condition of the country at that time. The poem though does not give us an accurate account of the battle which took place between Muhammad Ghori and Prithviraj Chauhan. It is an important source of information on the social and clan structure of the Kshatriyas of northern India.

Architecture

Monuments and coins are an important source of information of the Delhi Sultanate.

- Inscriptions related to the Delhi Sultanate are found on coins, monuments, milestones and tombstones. While some inscriptions are in Sanskrit, some are in Arabic. For example, the first set of coins issued by Bakhtiya Khilji bears both Arabic and Sanskrit inscriptions.
- The monuments made by the Sultans provide details of the living conditions, faiths, beliefs and level of science and technology which existed during the period. Domes, minarets, arches and popped roofs were four main architectural features of Turkish art.
- The famous monuments built during the period were the Quwat-ul-Islam Mosque and Qutub Minar built by Qutb-ud-din Aibak in Delhi. He also built Adhai din ka Jhompara at Ajmer. The tomb of



The Qutub Minar

Itutmish was built by Itutmish himself. Alai Darwaza, Siri Fort, Hauz Khas and Zamat Khana Masjid in Delhi were built by Alauddin Khilji.

- Qutb Minar is considered one of the most imposing structures constructed in medieval India. Its construction was started by Qutb-ud-din Aibak. The construction of Qutb Minar was completed by Itutmish. Features of the Qutb Minar:
 - The original height of the Qutb Minar was 7.14 metres with four storeys. Later, an additional storey was added to the monument.
 - The Minar is a circular tower with a diameter of 13.5 metres. It has a circular stairway of 379 steps leading to the top.
 - Each tower has a projecting balcony.
 - Verses from the Quran are inscribed on the tower.

Muhammad Ghori

- Muhammad Ghori ascended the throne at Ghazni in 1173. He was an ambitious ruler who wanted to establish an empire in India. Before his rule, the Arabs had invaded Sind. Mahmud of Ghazni had raided large parts of northern and western India, but he was not interested in controlling northern India.
- Prithviraj Chauhan of the Chauhan dynasty was ruling Delhi and Ajmer during the second half of the twelfth century. Because of the expansionist designs of Muhammad Ghori, the conflict between both rulers became inevitable.
- The First Battle of Tarain was fought in 1191 in which the forces of Ghori were completely routed by Prithviraj Chauhan.
- Muhammad Ghori decided to avenge his defeat. The Second Battle of Tarain was fought in 1192 between Muhammad Ghori and Prithviraj Chauhan. This time, Prithviraj Chauhan was defeated by Ghori and the latter established his rule over Delhi and Ajmer. It seems that Prithviraj Chauhan was allowed to rule Ajmer for some time as coins bearing the name 'Prithvirajadeva' on one side and 'Sri Muhammad Sam' on the other side have been found.
- In 1194, a battle was fought at Chandwar between Ghori and Jaichandra of Kannauj. The latter was killed in the battle and the Turks were successful in establishing their control over the territories extending up to the boundaries of Bihar.



Muhammad Ghori

Factors Leading to the Defeat of the Rajputs

The Rajputs despite their bravery lost important battles against the Turks. Reasons which led to their defeat against the Turks were

- The Rajputs were divided into numerous clans which gave greater importance to their own family traditions. They were divided and did not unite against the Turks. The Turks were thus not fighting against a unified army but against few dynasties.
- The Turkish army consisted mainly of cavalry and used horses of superior quality. The Rajputs, on the other hand, were using elephants which were not as swift as horses.
- The Turkish army had several military leaders who employed new tactics during wars. The Rajputs were efficient in fighting with spears and swords but were not as good archers as the Turks.

List of various dynasties and important rulers of the Delhi Sultanate who ruled over Delhi and the surrounding areas:

Name of the King	Dynasty	Time
Qutb-ud-din Aibak	Slave	1206–1210
Shamsuddin Iltutmish		1210–1236
Razia		1236–1240
Ghiyasuddin Balban		1266–1287
Jalaluddin Khilji	Khilji	1290–1296
Alauddin Khilji		1296–1316
Ghiyasuddin Tughlaq	Tughlaq	1320–1324
Muhammad bin Tughlaq		1325–1351
Firoz Shah Tughlaq		1351–1388
Khizr Khan	Sayyid	1414–1421
Bahlul Lodi	Lodi	1451–1489
Sikandar Lodi		1489–1517
Ibrahim Lodi		1517–1526

The Slave Dynasty

Five successive dynasties ruled Delhi. These were the Slave, Khilji, Tughlaq, Sayyid and Lodi dynasties.

Qutb-ud-din Aibak

- After annexing various parts of northern India, Muhammad Ghori appointed his able slave Qutb-ud-din Aibak as the Governor of the Indian provinces. Qutb-ud-din Aibak founded the slave dynasty. Because the Sultans of the Slave dynasty were either the slaves of the Turks or the sons of the slaves, they were also known as Mamluk Sultans.
- Qutb-ud-din Aibak captured the forts of Kalinjar in Bundelkhand and Anhilwara in Gujarat.
- He died because of a sudden fall from a horse while playing polo.



Qutb-ud-din Aibak was the founder of the Slave dynasty

Iltutmish

- Aram Shah succeeded his father Qutb-ud-din Aibak. However, he proved to be an incapable ruler. He was overthrown by Iltutmish, the slave and son in law of Aibak.
- Iltutmish successfully defeated most of his enemies and suppressed several revolts. One of his tactical achievements was the denial of refuge to Jalaluddin, the ruler of Iran who was being pursued by Chenghez Khan in 1221. Iltutmish feared a possible Mongol attack on India in the case of not providing shelter to Jalaluddin. He thus acted wisely and saved his kingdom from a possible Mongol attack.
- To reduce the powers of the nobles of his court, Iltutmish formed a group of forty nobles known as 'Turkan-i-Chahalgani' or 'Chalisa' which were a group of elite nobles.
- He divided his empire into various big and small iqtas, and sometimes gave iqtas to nobles and military commanders in lieu of salary.
- One important contribution of Iltutmish was that he introduced a silver coin known as 'tanka' and a copper coin known as 'jital' as standard coins during the Sultanate Period.

Razia Sultan

- After the death of Iltutmish, Razia became the first woman Sultan of Delhi in 1236.
- Razia had to face many challenges from powerful nobles who were not willing to accept a woman as a ruler. The Turkish nobles wanted a puppet ruler who could govern according to their wishes. Razia however was not willing to rule according to their desires.
- Razia Sultan dressed like a man and led armies into battlefield. She did not practice 'purdah', held open court, listened to the problems of her subjects and supervised the work of every department.
- When the provincial governors of some territories revolted against her, she failed to crush their power. Later, Razia married Altunia, the leader of a rebel group, to pacify them. However, both Razia and Altunia were killed in 1240.
- After the death of Razia Sultan, a line of weak rulers ruled Delhi. They were not able to consolidate the empire.
- Balban became the ruler of Delhi in 1266. He was a powerful noble who later became the Sultan of Delhi. He suppressed the powerful nobles and strengthened the powers of monarchy in the state.



Razia Sultan was the first woman ruler of Delhi.

The Khilji Dynasty

After the last ruler of the Slave dynasty was killed, the Khilji dynasty was founded by Jalaluddin Khilji.

Jalaluddin Khilji

- Jalaluddin founded the Khilji dynasty after killing Kaikubad, the last ruler of the Slave dynasty. After becoming the king, he lavishly rewarded nobles who had helped him in ascending the throne of Delhi.
- However, after his accession to the throne, he had to face opposition from Turkish nobles who wanted to assert their power.
- Jalaluddin was a mild and pious person. He gave high posts and titles to his friends, relatives and those nobles who had helped him.
- In 1296, he was treacherously murdered by his nephew Alauddin Khilji who declared himself as the new Sultan of Delhi.

Alauddin Khilji

Alauddin Khilji is known for his economic measures which were adopted by him for controlling the prices of commodities. He is also known for his expeditions into the south.

To save the country from Mongol attacks, Alauddin ordered the massacre of many Mongols who had accepted Islam and had settled in Delhi and nearby areas. Alauddin greatly expanded the empire after conquering Ujjain, Dhar, Chanderi and Mandu. By 1305, most of northern India was annexed by him. Alauddin built a strong army and began to pay the army in cash.



Alauddin Khilji

His notable economic policies were

Market Regulations

- Alauddin fixed the prices of various essential commodities such as food grains, sugar and cooking oil. He set up three markets at Delhi—one for food grains, the second for expensive clothes and the third for horses, slaves and cattle.

- Each market was put under a charge of a market controller or 'Shahna'. Strict punishments were given to the shopkeepers for cheating and under weighing goods.

Deccan Expeditions

- He was the first Muslim Sultan of Delhi who not only conquered most North Indian states but also sent an expedition to the south under Malik Kafur. The kingdoms of Dwar Samudra, Warangal, Devagiri and Madurai were defeated.
- Although he defeated these kingdoms, he did not annex them and allowed the rulers to rule after they promised to pay a regular tribute. He did not annex these states because he was interested in acquiring the wealth of the Deccan kingdoms for maintaining his huge army. Second, it was difficult to control the rugged and hilly terrains of Deccan.

Measures against Nobility

Alauddin realised that it was important to crush the powers of the nobles. He took the following steps against his nobles:

- Nobles were forbidden to organise any party or intermarry without the prior permission of the Sultan. Gambling was prohibited. This was done to ensure that the nobles do not gather and conspire against him.
- Nobles were not allowed to maintain armies. Drinking of wine was also banned.
- An efficient spy system was set up. Spies reported every activity of the nobles to the Sultan. They were spied outside and inside their homes.
- Land grants which were given to the nobles by the previous rulers were taken back from them. New grants of lands were made, but the landholders were only allowed to collect the revenues from the land and were not entitled to impose any additional taxes on the peasants.

Military Reforms

Alauddin introduced various reforms to make the army efficient and disciplined. These were

- He was the first Sultan of Delhi who laid the foundation of a permanent standing army.
- He introduced the system of maintaining the descriptive roll of soldiers (chehre) and the branding of horses (dagh).
- He built new forts and repaired old ones.
- Spies were employed in every army unit. Soldiers were paid regular salaries in cash.

Revenue Reforms

Alauddin had maintained a huge army. To meet the expenses of such a huge army, he introduced many revenue reforms. These were

- The land was carefully measured and the taxes to be paid to the state were fixed.
- Taxes were collected by the revenue officers who were appointed for this purpose.
- The revenue to be paid was increased from one-third to half and had to be paid in cash.

The Tughlaq Dynasty

The Khilji dynasty came to an end when Ghiyas-ud-din Tughlaq, the Governor of Dipalpur, became the Sultan of Delhi. He was succeeded by his son Muhammad bin Tughlaq.

Muhammad bin Tughlaq

Muhammad bin Tughlaq was one of the most remarkable rulers of his age. He was a great scholar and a lover of Persian literature, music, fine arts and calligraphy. He is known for some of his schemes and policies which failed disastrously over a period of time.



Muhammad bin Tughlaq

Transfer of Capital

Muhammad bin Tughlaq transferred his capital from Delhi to Daulatabad. He did this primarily because of two reasons:

- Daulatabad was centrally located and was equidistant from Delhi and other important places.
- Because Delhi was within the reach of the Mongols, Daulatabad appeared to be at a safe distance from the possible Mongol attacks in the future.

It is said that he ordered most people of Delhi to shift to Daulatabad. There was resentment among the people as they did not want to shift from Delhi. Because the 1,500 km journey was arduous, many people died on the way, and the survivors were not able to adjust to the new conditions. Without the king, Delhi now became prone to Mongol attacks. Later, Muhammad bin Tughlaq shifted his capital back to Delhi.

Token Currency

- Muhammad bin Tughlaq is criticised for his failed experiment with the token currency. The scarcity of silver and the abundance of copper and bronze prompted the Sultan to issue copper coins bearing the same value as that of silver coins.
- However, the new copper coins bearing the same value as the silver coins did not have any complicated designs and they could be easily forged.
- People started minting coins in their houses. The forged copper coins flooded the markets. The situation became worse when the traders and merchants refused to accept these coins. Economy came to a standstill.
- Realising his folly, Muhammad bin Tughlaq issued genuine silver coins in place of the copper coins. This further drained the royal treasury.

Taxation in Doab

- Doab is a fertile alluvial tract lying between Rivers Ganga and Yamuna. Muhammad Tughlaq increased the taxes in the Doab region as he was in need of money for raising a large army.
- Unfortunately, the increase in taxes coincided with a severe famine in the region. The tax collectors however showed no signs of mercy and ruthlessly collected taxes.
- Unable to pay the taxes, peasants abandoned their lands and fled to forests.
- When the plight of peasants reached Muhammad Tughlaq, he ordered several relief measures. He opened free kitchens and distributed free grains. However, these measures came too late and agriculture greatly suffered in the region. Thus, his scheme of taxation in Doab failed.

Plan of Conquests

Muhammad bin had an ambition of conquering the world. He thus organised a strong army and paid them one full year's salary in advance. He decided to annex Khurasan, Persia and Iraq. However, because of financial pressures following the failure of taxation in Doab and the token currency, he abandoned the project and disbanded the army.

Firoz Shah Tughlaq

- Firoz Shah Tughlaq succeeded the throne after Muhammad bin Tughlaq's death.
- Firoz Shah Tughlaq garnered the support of nobles and Ulemas by giving them land grants.
- He started manufacturing centres known as 'karkhanas' and constructed roads and canals.
- He established a department of charity and gave financial help to the poor and needy. He also set up a separate department to look after the condition of slaves.



Firoz Shah Tughlaq

- He died in 1388. The Empire began to show signs of disintegration after his death.
- It was during the rule of the Tughlaq dynasty that Timur invaded India in 1398. He defeated the Sultanate army and massacred the people of Delhi during his few days of stay in the city.

The Sayyid Dynasty

- After the departure of Timur from Delhi, Khizr Khan ascended the throne of Delhi and established the Sayyid dynasty.
- He was succeeded by many weak rulers such as Mubarak II, Muhammad Shah and Ala-ud-Din Shah.
- These kings could not do anything substantially for the regions over which they ruled.

The Lodhi Dynasty

- The Lodhis were the Afghans who ruled Delhi for about 75 years.
- Three important kings of the Lodhi dynasty were Bahlul Lodhi, Sikander Lodhi and Ibrahim Lodhi. The authority of these kings did not extend beyond Delhi.
- The Delhi Sultanate came to an end when Ibrahim Lodhi was defeated by the Mongol ruler Babur in the First Battle of Panipat in 1526.

Administration of the Delhi Sultanate

- The administration under the Turks was highly centralised as all executive, legislative and judicial powers were centred in the hands of the king.
- The Sultan was assisted by several ministers. Wazir was the Prime Minister who supervised the works of various ministers.
- The minister in charge of the army was known as 'Ariz-i-mumalik'. His main responsibility was to recruit, equip and pay the army men. The king was the commander-in-chief of the army.
- Some important departments were the diwan-i-risalat and the diwan-i-insha. While the former dealt with religious matters, the latter dealt with state correspondence.
- The empire during the Sultanate Period was divided into various provinces known as 'iqtas'. Each province was placed under a 'muqti'. The provinces were further divided into paranganas or districts.
- The muqaddam was a village headman who looked after the affairs of the village. The 'patwari' maintained the records of the land and the 'mushrif' was the village accountant. Each village had a panchayat to settle local disputes.
- During this time, the practice of giving grants of revenues in the form of a territory came to be known as the 'iqta system'. The persons to whom iqta were given were known as 'iqtadars'. They also maintained troops of soldiers to be used by the Sultan during wars. They paid salaries to soldiers through the revenues received by them from the iqta which was granted to them by the king.

Social Life

- There were deep inequalities of income during the Sultanate Period. While the rich and the noble lived a luxurious life, the poor lived a life of hardships.
- There were no changes in the Hindu society. They followed a rigid caste system where all privileges were enjoyed by the Brahmins. Kshatriyas occupied the second position in society; their main responsibility was to protect the kingdom and the people.
- Vaishyas were basically engaged in farming. Shudras occupied the lowest position in society and had to do all menial works. They were ostracised and oppressed.

- Muslims in India were divided into various ethnic and racial groups. There were Turkish, Iranian, Arab, Afghan and Abyssinian Muslims. They were further divided on the basis of origin, religion and occupation.
- According to many contemporary accounts, child marriages were in existence. Many travellers made reference to the evil practice of sati. According to Ibn Battuta, permission of the Sultan had to be taken for performing sati. The women of the upper caste practised the purdah system.