

ANANTAM IAS · OPTIONAL NOTES

# History Optional The Thirteenth Century

**Paper 1 • Unit 15**

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The foundation of the Delhi Sultanate, Iltutmish, Balban and the Mongol threat: 15 marks in four years, but the institutional groundwork for the whole medieval section.

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## UPSC SYLLABUS

The thirteenth century: establishment of the Delhi Sultanate; the Ghurian invasions, factors behind Ghurian success; economic, social and cultural consequences; foundation of the Delhi Sultanate and early Turkish sultans; consolidation of the sultanate under Iltutmish and Balban.

## The Ghurid conquest and why it succeeded

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The standard question asks why north Indian kingdoms lost, and the answer is military and organisational rather than civilisational.

- **Muhammad Ghori** was defeated by **Prithviraj Chauhan at the First Battle of Tarain in 1191** and won the **Second Battle of Tarain in 1192**, which is the decisive engagement.
- **Battle of Chandawar in 1194** defeated Jayachandra of Kanauj and completed the conquest of the Ganga-Yamuna doab.
- **Military factors** favouring the Ghurids were mounted archery, the use of iron stirrups permitting effective cavalry shock, superior mobility, and a unified command pursuing conquest rather than tribute.
- **Indian weaknesses** were political fragmentation among Rajput houses, reliance on elephants and infantry, the samanta system of clan levies rather than a standing army, and a military culture aimed at defeating rather than destroying an opponent.
- **Absence of political unity** is the standard explanation and it is correct as far as it goes, but it describes the condition rather than explaining why the Ghurids alone exploited it.
- **Bakhtiyar Khalji's** campaigns in Bihar and Bengal in the first years of the thirteenth century extended the conquest eastward and destroyed the great Buddhist monasteries at Nalanda and Odantapuri.
- **Ghurid dynasty itself did not survive**, since Muhammad Ghori was assassinated in 1206 without an heir, and the Indian territories passed to his slave commanders, which is why the Delhi Sultanate begins as a state founded by slaves.
- **Consequences** were the establishment of a permanent Turkish ruling class in north India, the introduction of the iqta system, Persian as the language of government, and Indo-Islamic architecture.

## The early sultans

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A sequence of slave commanders establishing a state, and the fragility of that arrangement is the period's theme.

- **Qutbuddin Aibak**, Ghori's slave commander, ruled from 1206 to 1210 from Lahore, began the Quwwat-ul-Islam mosque and the Qutb Minar, and died in a polo accident.
- **Iltutmish**, ruling 1210 to 1236, is the true founder of the Sultanate, since Aibak's brief reign left no institutions behind.
- **Aram Shah**, Aibak's nominal successor, was set aside by Iltutmish, which established immediately that succession would be decided by force among the Turkish nobility.
- **Mongol threat** defined Iltutmish's foreign policy, and his refusal to shelter Jalaluddin Mangbarani against Chinggis Khan in 1221 kept the Mongols out of India at a moment when they could have destroyed the new state.

- That decision is the single most consequential of the reign, and it is the standard illustration of political judgement in the Sultanate's early years.
- **Raziya**, ruling 1236 to 1240, was Iltutmish's own nominee and the only woman to hold the throne of Delhi, and she was overthrown by the Turkish nobility rather than defeated in the field.
- **Nasiruddin Mahmud** ruled nominally from 1246 to 1266 while Balban as naib exercised actual power, and the arrangement shows the Chalisa preferring a weak sultan to a strong one.
- **Chalisa**, the corps of forty Turkish nobles, dominated the years after Raziya and made and unmade sultans until Balban broke it.

## Iltutmish and the institutions

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The organisational achievements of this reign are what a question on consolidation is asking about.

- **Iqta system** was introduced as the fiscal and military backbone, assigning territorial revenue to commanders in return for troops, and its transferability was the design's central feature.
- **Coinage** was standardised with the silver **tanka** and the copper **jital**, and a uniform currency across a large territory is itself evidence of administrative reach.
- **Investiture from the Abbasid Caliph** in 1229 gave the Sultanate legal standing in the wider Islamic world and legitimacy against rivals.
- **Capital at Delhi** was fixed rather than Lahore, which oriented the state towards the Ganga valley and away from the Afghan homeland.
- **Chalisa** was organised by Iltutmish as his own corps of loyal Turkish slave officers, and it became the instrument that dominated his successors.
- **Architecture** advanced with the completion of the Qutb Minar and the tomb of Iltutmish, the latter among the earliest Islamic tombs in India.
- **Territorial consolidation** under Iltutmish recovered Bengal and Bihar, suppressed the Qubacha in Sindh and Multan, and secured Rajasthan partially, so the state he left was territorially coherent as well as institutionally equipped.
- Assessment: Iltutmish converted a military occupation into a state with revenue, currency, legitimacy and a capital, which is why he rather than Aibak is called the founder.

## Balban and the theory of kingship

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Asked in 2023 on why he preferred consolidation over expansion. The answer is that he faced two threats and could afford to address only one.

- **Balban**, ruling 1266 to 1287 after decades as the power behind the throne, inherited a state weakened by the succession disputes following Iltutmish.
- **Two threats** defined his position, the **Mongols** pressing on the northwest frontier and the **Chalisa** and rebellious governors within, and both required a concentrated army rather than distant campaigns.
- That is the answer to the 2023 question: expansion would have dispersed the army he needed for frontier defence and internal discipline, so consolidation was a strategic necessity rather than a preference.

- **Theory of kingship** was his central contribution, presenting the sultan as **zill-i-ilahi**, the shadow of God, and claiming descent from the mythical Iranian hero Afrasiyab.
- **Court ceremonial** enforced that claim through **sijda** and **paibos**, prostration and kissing the feet, and through the Persian Nauroz festival, so that the sultan was made physically unapproachable.
- **Blood and iron** describes his internal policy, since he destroyed the Chalisa by execution and demotion, suppressed the Mewati raids around Delhi with great severity, and crushed the Bengal revolt of Tughril Khan.
- **Army reform** created a strong standing force under a **diwan-i-arz**, with the frontier fortified and garrisoned against the Mongols.
- **Spy system** reported directly to the sultan and was independent of the provincial governors, which is the administrative expression of his distrust.
- **Succession** was never solved, and Balban's own arrangements collapsed immediately on his death, since his chosen heir Muhammad had been killed fighting the Mongols and his grandson Kaiqubad proved incapable, which is the standing structural weakness of the whole Sultanate.
- **Cost** of the policy was that the Sultanate remained territorially static for two decades, and his successors were overthrown within three years of his death by the Khaljis.

## Consequences and the transition

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Close by connecting to the Fourteenth Century unit, since the two are examined as a sequence.

- **Economic consequences** included the growth of Delhi as a major city, the introduction of new technologies over the following decades, and the reorientation of north Indian trade towards Central Asia.
- **Social consequences** included the arrival of a Turkish and Persian ruling class, the growth of a Muslim urban population through immigration and conversion, and the persistence of Hindu chiefs as tributary rais and rawats.
- **Cultural consequences** were Persian as the language of administration and literature, the arrival of Sufism with Moinuddin Chishti at Ajmer, and the beginnings of Indo-Islamic architecture.
- **Qutb Minar** itself illustrates the transition, since its lowest storey is Aibak's and the upper storeys were added by Iltutmish and later repaired by Firuz Shah Tughlaq, so one building records three reigns of the Sultanate.
- **Continuity** with earlier Indian practice was substantial in revenue administration, where existing intermediaries and assessment methods were largely retained at village level.
- **Khalji revolution of 1290** ended Turkish exclusivity and opened office to Afghans, Indian Muslims and converts, which is where the Fourteenth Century unit begins.
- **Religious policy** was pragmatic rather than doctrinal, since the Hindu majority was treated as **zimmi** paying jizya rather than facing forced conversion, and the state depended on Hindu revenue officials and village intermediaries throughout.
- The framing to carry forward: the thirteenth century built the **institutional apparatus**, meaning iqta, coinage, army and court, that Alauddin Khalji then used at maximum intensity.

**Last-mile revision**

- Tarain 1191 and 1192, Chandawar 1194; Bakhtiyar Khalji in Bihar and Bengal; Aibak 1206-10; Iltutmish 1210-36.
- Iltutmish: iqta, tanka and jital, Abbasid investiture 1229, capital fixed at Delhi, refuses Mangbarni 1221.
- Raziya 1236-40 overthrown by the Turkish nobility; Chalisa dominates until Balban.
- Balban 1266-87: zill-i-ilahi, Afrasiyab descent, sijda and paibos, blood and iron, diwan-i-arz, spy system; consolidation forced by Mongol and internal threats.
- Khalji revolution 1290 ends Turkish monopoly.

### Common errors to avoid

- Calling Aibak the founder of the Sultanate. He ruled four years from Lahore and left no institutions; Iltutmish is the founder.
- Explaining Ghurid success by religious zeal. Mounted archery, stirrups, mobility and unified command are the operative factors.
- Saying Raziya failed through incapacity. She was overthrown by a Turkish nobility that would not accept a woman, which is a structural rather than personal failure.
- Treating Balban's consolidation as timidity. He faced the Mongols on the frontier and the Chalisa at court, and could not fight both and expand.
- Forgetting that Hindu chiefs continued as tributary rais and rawats, so conquest was not replacement.

## Mains Practice

### Why did Balban prefer 'consolidation' over 'expansion' of the Delhi Sultanate?

15 marks · 200 words · 2023