ANANTAM IAS · OPTIONAL NOTES

History Optional
The Fourteenth Century

Paper 1 · Unit 16

Alauddin Khalji's market control, Muhammad bin Tughlaq's experiments and Firuz Shah's retrenchment: 80 marks in four years and the unit where economic policy is examined hardest.

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UPSC SYLLABUS

The fourteenth century: the Khalji revolution; Alauddin Khalji, conquests and territorial expansion, agrarian and economic measures; Muhammad Tughluq, major projects, agrarian measures, bureaucracy of Muhammad Tughluq; Firuz Tughluq, agrarian measures, achievements in civil engineering and public works, decline of the Sultanate, foreign contacts and Ibn Battuta's account.

The Khalji revolution

The phrase is a technical one and candidates use it loosely. It refers to a change in the composition of the ruling class, not merely a change of dynasty, and saying so precisely earns the first marks of any answer here.

- **Jalaluddin Khalji** displaced the Ilbari Turks in 1290, and the significance is that the Khaljis were of Turkish descent long settled in Afghanistan and were not accepted as pure Turks by the existing nobility.
- That **revolution** consisted in breaking the monopoly of the Turkish racial aristocracy, the **Chalisa** or corps of forty that Balban had already curbed, and opening high office to Indian Muslims, Afghans and converts on the basis of ability and loyalty.
- **Barani**, writing later and from an aristocratic standpoint, deplored precisely this, complaining that low-born men were raised to high office, and his hostility is the best evidence that the change was real.
- **Alauddin Khalji** seized power in 1296 after murdering his uncle Jalaluddin, and his reign to 1316 is the high point of Sultanate centralisation.
- Alauddin's four ordinances against noble conspiracy are the classic list: confiscation of religious endowments and grants, reorganisation of the espionage system, prohibition of wine and of social gatherings among nobles, and prohibition of marriage alliances between noble families without permission.
- He also **separated religion from politics** in practice, refusing to be bound by the ulama in matters of state, and Barani records his statement that he issued orders as he judged beneficial to the state.
- Military reform brought the branding of horses, the descriptive roll of soldiers, a standing army paid in cash rather than by assignment, and the fortification and garrisoning of the frontier against the Mongols.
- **Territorial expansion** under Alauddin was the widest any Sultanate ruler achieved, with Gujarat in 1299, Ranthambhor 1301, Chittor 1303, Malwa 1305, and Malik Kafur's southern campaigns from 1307 reaching Devagiri, Warangal, Dwarasamudra and Madurai, though the south was made tributary rather than annexed.
- Mongol pressure is the underrated driver of everything else, since repeated invasions between 1297 and 1308 required a large standing army, which required cash, which required the revenue and market measures that follow.

KEY TERMS

Chalisa — The corps of forty Turkish nobles who dominated the early Sultanate; their power was broken by Balban and their monopoly ended by the Khaljis.

Alauddin's agrarian and market measures

Asked in 2023 and 2025, which makes this the single most examined topic in the unit. The examiner wants the mechanism and the purpose, and the purpose is military before it is humanitarian.

- Revenue was fixed at **half the produce**, assessed on measured land through **biswa** measurement, which removed the intermediaries' discretion and is the first systematic measurement in the Sultanate.
- In the doab the **kharaj** was collected in kind so that the state held grain to release into the market, and additional taxes of **ghari** on houses and **charai** on grazing cattle were imposed.
- Intermediaries, meaning the **khuts, muqaddams and chaudhuris**, lost their customary exemptions and their right to levy their own cesses, and Barani writes that they were reduced to the level of ordinary cultivators.
- That reduction of the intermediaries is exactly what the 2023 question asks about, so the measures to cite are the abolition of their perquisites, the imposition of the same rate on them as on the peasantry, and direct collection.
- Four markets came under the **market control** system: grain, cloth and manufactured goods at the **Sarai Adl**, horses, slaves and cattle, and a general market for everyday commodities.
- Enforcement rested on fixed schedules of prices, registration of merchants, the **shahna-i-mandi** as market controller, a network of **barids** and secret informers, state granaries, rationing in scarcity, and severe punishment for short weight.
- Its **purpose**, which is the 2025 question, was to maintain a very large standing army against the Mongols at a sustainable cost: if prices were fixed low, soldiers could be paid low cash salaries, and the whole system is a solution to a military finance problem.
- Enforcement decided everything, since the system worked while Alauddin lived and collapsed almost immediately after his death, which tells you it depended on coercive enforcement rather than on any adjustment of supply.
- The modern assessment, following **Irfan Habib** and **Satish Chandra**, is that this was among the most sophisticated administrative systems of the medieval world and also among the most extractive, and both halves belong in the answer.

Market	What it covered	Mechanism
Sarai Adl	Cloth, manufactured goods, imports	Registered merchants, fixed schedules, state advances
Grain market	Foodgrains	Fixed prices, state granaries, rationing in scarcity
Horse and slave market	Horses, slaves, cattle	Fixed prices by category, brokers regulated
General market	Everyday commodities	Shahna-i-mandi, barids and secret informers

Alauddin's market control. The mechanism column is what separates a scoring answer from a vague one.

Muhammad bin Tughlaq: the projects

Asked in 2026 through the token currency. The trap is to write him off as eccentric; the historiographical consensus is that the schemes were rational in conception and defeated in execution.

- The **transfer of the capital** to Devagiri, renamed Daulatabad, in 1327 was strategically sensible given the Deccan's importance and the Mongol threat to Delhi, and the road was provisioned with rest houses.
- It failed on the human cost of moving an entire administrative population and on the loss of Delhi's strategic centrality against the Mongols, and the return compounded the damage.
- The **token currency** of 1329 to 1330 issued brass and copper coins with the value of silver tankas, and the concept is sound, being the same principle as any fiat currency.
- It failed because the mint was not a state monopoly in practice, so forgery was easy and widespread, and because the state honoured redemption in silver, which allowed the treasury to be drained by counterfeit coin.
- The 2026 question calls it an innovative economic experiment whose failure exposed the limits of state control over the medieval economy, and that formulation is defensible: the state lacked the monopoly of minting technology and the enforcement reach that fiat money requires.
- Two military projects, the **Khurasan and Qarachil expeditions**, attempted forward defence and Himalayan control; both failed expensively, the latter to weather and terrain.
- The **doab tax increase** during a period of drought, and the subsequent revolt and flight of the peasantry, is the most straightforwardly damaging of his measures.
- A department of agriculture, the **Diwan-i-Kohi**, was established to promote cultivation with state loans called **sondhar**, was a genuinely progressive idea that failed on poor land selection and official corruption.
- **Barani and Ibn Battuta disagree productively** about him, Barani from a hostile aristocratic standpoint and Ibn Battuta from inside the court, and reading them against each other is the sort of source criticism the recent papers reward.
- The assessment to write: he was learned, rational and ambitious, and his failures were failures of administrative capacity, information and timing rather than of intelligence, which is why **Barani** and **Ibn Battuta** both record admiration alongside criticism.

Firuz Shah Tughlaq: retrenchment and public works

Asked in 2024 on his economic policies. He is the mirror image of his predecessor: cautious where Muhammad was bold, and storing up problems where Muhammad created them.

- Firuz **restored the jagir system**, made **iqtas hereditary**, and made army positions hereditary too, which bought aristocratic support at the cost of the centralisation Alauddin had built.
- He **abolished about twenty three vexatious cesses** not sanctioned by the sharia, and fixed the land revenue by an assessment rather than by measurement, which reduced friction but also reduced yield.
- He imposed **jizya** as a separate tax including on Brahmins for the first time, which had been effectively exempted before, and this is a real change in policy rather than a continuation.

- The **irrigation works** are his outstanding achievement: canals from the Yamuna and Sutlej to Hansi, Hisar and Firuzabad, an irrigation tax of **haqq-i-sharb** at ten per cent, and a documented expansion of cultivation and of garden crops.
- The **civil engineering** record includes the founding of Firuzabad, Hisar, Jaunpur and Fatehabad, the repair of the Qutb Minar and of Sultan Ghari's tomb, the transport of two Ashokan pillars to Delhi, and a hospital, the **Dar-ul-Shafa**, offering free treatment.
- He created a **Diwan-i-Khairat** for charity and dowries and an employment bureau, and he expanded the corps of **slaves**, reportedly to about one hundred and eighty thousand, organised as a department.
- The slave corps is the structural error to name, since it created an enormous armed interest group with no loyalty beyond the sultan's person, and it disintegrated destructively after his death.
- For the 2024 question, the balanced verdict is that his economic policies raised agricultural output and reduced the tax burden while dismantling the central control that had made the Sultanate strong, so prosperity in his reign was purchased with the state's capacity after it.

The decline of the Sultanate

Asked in 2023 directly. Give structural causes rather than a list of weak sultans, and put Timur at the end rather than the beginning.

- **Hereditary iqtas and army posts** under Firuz reversed the centralising achievement and recreated a landed military aristocracy the state could not discipline.
- The **slave corps** fragmented into factions on Firuz's death in 1388 and became a destabilising force in the succession struggles that followed.
- **Provincial secession** was well advanced before any external shock, with Bengal independent from 1338, Madurai from 1335, the Bahmani kingdom from 1347 and Vijayanagara from 1336.
- The Sultanate's **structural problem** was that it never solved the transmission of power, having no accepted rule of succession, so every death produced a contest that consumed resources and legitimacy.
- The **fiscal base** narrowed as territory contracted, while obligations to a hereditary military class did not, which is the same jagirdari logic that would later undo the Mughals.
- **Timur's invasion of 1398**, the sack of Delhi and the massacre are conventionally treated as the end, but they finished a state that had already lost most of its territory and revenue.
- The **Sayyid and Lodi** successors ruled a much reduced territory, and the 2026 question about Alauddin Alam Shah's abdication in favour of Bahlol Lodi belongs to this aftermath.
- **Regional sultanates** that broke away, Jaunpur, Malwa, Gujarat, Bengal and the Bahmanis, each developed distinct architectural and literary traditions, so fragmentation produced cultural plurality rather than a cultural dark age.
- The **legacy** is what matters for later units: a Persianate administrative vocabulary, the iqta and later jagir principle, an Indo-Islamic architectural idiom, and a demonstration that a north Indian empire was possible, all of which the Mughals inherited.

Society, culture and the economy of the century

Questions in this unit often widen beyond the three sultans, so hold a section on the wider fourteenth century.

- **Urbanisation** advanced sharply, with Delhi among the largest cities in the world, and the Sultanate's demand for goods and services stimulated craft production and long distance trade.
- The **iqta** system distributed revenue to military commanders in return for troops, and its transformation from transferable assignment to hereditary holding is the central institutional story of the century.
- **Technology** introduced or diffused in this period includes the spinning wheel, the vertical water-lifting wheel or **saqiya** with a gear mechanism, paper manufacture and the true arch and dome in construction.
- **Irfan Habib's** work on medieval technology treats these as a significant cluster, arguing that the Sultanate period saw genuine diffusion rather than stagnation, and this is a useful counter to any picture of medieval torpor.
- **Coinage** under the Sultanate was well developed, with the silver tanka and the billon jital as the standard denominations, and Alauddin's and Muhammad's monetary interventions have to be read against that established system.
- **Sufism** flourished, with the Chishti order at its height under **Nizamuddin Auliya** in Delhi and **Nasiruddin Chiragh-i-Dehlavi** after him, and the khanqah functioned as a social institution reaching well beyond the court.
- **Amir Khusrau**, disciple of Nizamuddin, is the century's outstanding literary figure, writing in Persian and in Hindavi, and his work is the best evidence of cultural synthesis in progress.
- **Architecture** developed the true arch, the dome on squinches and later pendentives, and the Tughlaq style of battered walls and austere fortress-like mosques at Tughlaqabad and Firuzabad is distinct from Khalji work such as the Alai Darwaza of 1311.
- **Vijayanagara and the Bahmani kingdom**, both founded in the 1330s and 1340s, mean that the fourteenth century is also the century in which the Deccan became permanently independent of Delhi, a fact that shapes the whole of the next two units.
- **Bhakti** continued to spread, and Ramananda's north Indian lineage that would produce Kabir and Nanak takes shape in this and the following century.

The Tughlaq bureaucracy

The syllabus names the bureaucracy of Muhammad Tughlaq separately, which makes it fair game on its own. It is also the best short account of how the Sultanate actually governed.

- The central departments were the **Diwan-i-Wizarat** for finance under the wazir, the **Diwan-i-Arz** for the military under the ariz-i-mumalik, the **Diwan-i-Insha** for correspondence, and the **Diwan-i-Risalat** for religious affairs and appeals.
- Muhammad bin Tughlaq added the **Diwan-i-Kohi** for agriculture and the **Diwan-i-Bandagan** for slaves, and Firuz later added the **Diwan-i-Khairat** for charity, so the departmental structure expanded through the century.

- Provincial administration ran through the **iqta** held by a **muqti** or **wali**, who collected revenue, maintained troops and remitted the surplus, with the **khwaja** and **amil** as auditing officers sent from the centre.
- Below that, the **shiq** and the **pargana** under the **amil** and **mushrif**, and the village under the muqaddam and patwari, gave a chain of four or five levels from sultan to cultivator.
- **Muhammad's recruitment** was unusually open: he drew heavily on foreigners, on Indian Muslims and on men of humble origin, and Barani's complaint about cooks, barbers and gardeners being given high office is the standard evidence.
- That openness was a deliberate attempt to build a bureaucracy loyal to the sultan rather than to the old nobility, and its failure is instructive, since men without local standing could not enforce policy in the provinces.
- **Distance and time** set the outer limit on everything: a message from Delhi to the Deccan took weeks even by the fastest post, so provincial governors necessarily exercised discretion, and that discretion is what turned iqtas into principalities.
- The **information problem** is the deepest structural weakness: the state could not measure what it was taxing across so large a territory, which is why measurement-based systems worked only near the capital and nasaq-style assessment prevailed elsewhere.
- The **barid** intelligence network and the postal system were the attempted solution, and Ibn Battuta's admiration for the speed of the foot post is evidence that this was genuinely impressive by contemporary standards.

KEY TERMS

Muqti — The holder of an iqta, responsible for collecting revenue and maintaining a troop contingent from it.

Diwan-i-Arz — The military department under the ariz-i-mumalik, responsible for recruitment, muster, branding and pay.

Ibn Battuta and the foreign accounts

Named in the syllabus, so it can be asked directly, and it fits the historiographical turn UPSC has taken in Paper 1.

- **Ibn Battuta**, a Moroccan traveller, reached India in 1333, served Muhammad bin Tughlaq as **qazi of Delhi** for several years, and was later sent as envoy to China.
- His account, the **Rihla**, dictated after his return, is the fullest outsider description of fourteenth century India, covering the court, the postal system, markets, agriculture, social customs and the Sufi orders.
- His description of the **dawa** or horse post and the **ulaq** foot post, with runners at short intervals, is the standard source for Sultanate communications, and he notes it was faster than the horse post.
- He is an unusually good source on **coconut, betel, mango** and on food and cultivation, because he was writing for an audience unfamiliar with them and therefore explained what an Indian source would assume.
- The **limitations** matter for a source-criticism answer: he wrote from memory long after the events, he was a court insider whose view of the Sultan is coloured by patronage and fear, and parts of the Rihla appear to draw on earlier written accounts.

- Other foreign accounts of the period and its margins include **Marco Polo** on the south, **Abdur Razzaq** at Vijayanagara in the next century, and **Al-Biruni** from an earlier one, and knowing which century each belongs to prevents a common error.
- **Shams-i-Siraj Afif**, whose Tarikh-i-Firuz Shahi covers Firuz's reign, and **Isami**, author of the Futuh-us-Salatin, are the indigenous chroniclers to pair with the foreign accounts.
- The use to make of them: foreign accounts supply the everyday detail that court chronicles omit, and they are strongest on what surprised the writer and weakest on what he could not observe directly.

Last-mile revision

- Khalji revolution 1290 means the end of the Turkish racial monopoly, not just a dynastic change; Barani's hostility proves it.
- Alauddin from 1296: four ordinances, branding and descriptive roll, cash-paid standing army, revenue at half the produce on measured land.
- Four markets with the Sarai Adl, shahna-i-mandi, barids, state granaries; purpose is a cheap large army against the Mongols.
- Muhammad bin Tughlaq: Daulatabad 1327, token currency 1329-30, Khurasan and Qarachil, doab tax in drought, Diwan-i-Kohi and sondhar loans.
- Firuz: hereditary iqtas and army posts, twenty three cesses abolished, jizya on Brahmins, canals and haqq-i-sharb at ten per cent, Firuzabad Hisar Jaunpur Fatehabad, slave corps about 180,000.
- Decline: hereditary iqtas, slave factions, secessions from 1335-47, no succession rule, Timur 1398 finishes a shrunken state.
- Ibn Battuta arrives 1333, qazi of Delhi, the Rihla, dawa horse post and ulaq foot post.

Common errors to avoid

- Treating the Khalji revolution as merely a change of dynasty. It was a change in the social composition of the ruling class.
- Explaining Alauddin's market control as consumer welfare. It was military finance, and the system died with him.
- Calling Muhammad bin Tughlaq mad or eccentric. The consensus is that the schemes were rational and the execution and information base were not.
- Saying the token currency failed because people did not accept it. It failed because minting was not a state monopoly, so forgery drained the treasury on redemption.
- Praising Firuz without noting that hereditary iqtas and the slave corps dismantled central control.
- Beginning the decline with Timur. Bengal, Madurai, the Bahmanis and Vijayanagara had already broken away decades earlier.
- Using Ibn Battuta uncritically. He wrote from memory, as a patronised insider, long after the events.

Mains Practice

Critically analyze Barani's Tarikh-i-Firoz Shahi and identify the shortcomings in his account.

15 marks · 200 words · 2026

Barani's "Fatwa-i-Jahandari" was not a proper account of the Delhi Sultanate, rather a lament. Elucidate.

15 marks · 200 words · 2025

"Muhammad-bin-Tughlaq's token currency scheme was an innovative economic experiment, but its failure exposed the limitations of State control over the medieval economy." Evaluate.

10 marks · 150 words · 2026

"Alauddin Khilji's economic measures aimed at centralising political authority in the Delhi Sultanate." Elucidate.

10 marks · 150 words · 2025

Evaluate Firuz Shah Tughluq's economic policies.

10 marks · 150 words · 2024

What factors do you attribute to the decline of the Delhi Sultanate?

10 marks · 150 words · 2023