

ANANTAM IAS • OPTIONAL NOTES

History Optional Society, Culture and Economy in the Thirteenth and Fifteenth Centuries

Paper 1 • Unit 17

Iqta and revenue, urbanisation, technology, women and the Sufi and Bhakti social world under the Sultanate: 40 marks in four years.

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UPSC SYLLABUS

Society, culture and economy in the thirteenth and fifteenth centuries: society, composition of rural society, ruling classes, town dwellers, women, religious classes, caste and slavery under the Delhi Sultanate, Bhakti movement, Sufi movement; culture, Persian literature, literature in the regional languages of North India, literature in the languages of South India, Sultanate architecture and new structural forms, painting, evolution of a composite culture; economy, agricultural production, rise of urban economy and non-agricultural production, trade and commerce.

Rural society and the revenue structure

The countryside is where most people lived and where the state's demands were felt. Get the intermediary vocabulary right, because it recurs across the whole medieval section.

- **Iqta** was the assignment of a territory's revenue to a **muqti or wali** in return for maintaining troops, and it was in principle transferable and non-hereditary.
- That transferability was the system's strength under Alauddin Khalji and its weakness once **Firuz Shah Tughlaq made iqtas hereditary**, which recreated a landed military class the state could not discipline.
- **Khalisa** land was reserved for direct crown collection, and the ratio of khalisa to iqta is a standing indicator of central strength across the whole medieval period.
- Village intermediaries were the **khut, muqaddam and chaudhuri**, who held customary perquisites and collected from the cultivators, and Alauddin's reduction of their privileges is his most socially significant measure.
- **Balahar** was the ordinary peasant cultivator, and the distance between him and the khut in landholding, tax liability and lifestyle is described with unusual directness by Barani.
- Revenue was assessed by **measurement, sharing or estimation**, and Alauddin's move to measurement at half the produce was exceptional rather than typical of the period.
- **Agricultural production** expanded through the Sultanate period, with the syllabus noting the introduction of new crops and the extension of cultivation, and irrigation received real state investment.
- **Canal building** under Firuz Shah, from the Yamuna and Sutlej to Hisar and Hansi, is the largest medieval irrigation project before the Mughals, and it was financed by the haqq-i-sharb water tax at ten per cent.
- **Rural resistance** took the form of flight, non-payment and armed revolt by zamindars and khuts, and the state's difficulty in collecting from distant provinces is the standing structural problem.

The ruling classes and the composition of the elite

The Sultanate's nobility was foreign in origin and repeatedly reconstituted, and the tension between old and new elites drives most of its political history.

- Early nobility was **Turkish and slave-origin**, with Iltutmish's **Chalisa** or corps of forty dominating until Balban curbed it.
- **Slave elites** are the period's distinctive feature, since a purchased slave could rise to command an army and found a dynasty, as Qutbuddin Aibak and Iltutmish both did.

- That fact makes **slavery under the Sultanate** unlike plantation slavery, since military and administrative slaves held enormous power while domestic and agricultural slaves did not.
- **Khalji revolution** of 1290 broke the Turkish monopoly and opened office to Afghans, Indian Muslims and converts, and Barani's outrage at cooks and barbers holding office is the evidence.
- **Mongol immigration** brought new groups into the elite, particularly after the Mongol sack of Baghdad in 1258 sent scholars and administrators eastward to Delhi.
- **Indian Muslim and Hindu participation** grew steadily, with Hindu officials in revenue administration throughout and Hindu chiefs retained as tributary rais and rawats.
- **Ulama** formed a distinct religious establishment claiming authority over the state, and Alauddin's refusal to be bound by them, recorded by Barani, is the clearest medieval assertion of *raison d'etat*.
- **Sufi shaikhs** formed a counter-authority, particularly the Chishtis who refused state office, and Nizamuddin Auliya's refusal to attend court under seven sultans is the standing example.
- Elite instability is the pattern to name, since no ruling group in the Sultanate lasted more than two or three generations before being displaced by a newer one.

Towns, technology and the urban economy

The Sultanate period sees genuine urban growth, and the technologies introduced are among the most examinable specifics in the medieval section.

- **Delhi** became one of the largest cities in the world in the fourteenth century, and Ibn Battuta described it as the greatest city of the Muslim east.
- Urban growth was driven by the **concentration of revenue in the towns**, since the iqta system moved the agrarian surplus to garrison and administrative centres where it was spent.
- **Karkhanas** of the royal establishment employed large numbers of artisans in textiles, arms, building and luxury goods, and Firuz Shah's establishment is described in detail by Afif.
- **Technologies** introduced or diffused in this period are the examinable list: the **spinning wheel or charkha**, the **treadle loom**, the **vertical water-lifting wheel or saqiya with a gear mechanism**, **paper**, and the **true arch and dome** in construction.
- **Irfan Habib's** work on medieval technology treats these as a significant cluster, and the spinning wheel in particular is estimated to have multiplied yarn output several times over.
- **Paper** replaced palm leaf and birch bark for records and books, and its spread underlies both the growth of administration and the volume of surviving Persian literature.
- **Cotton textile production** expanded on the back of the spinning wheel, and Indian cloth became the subcontinent's principal export well before European arrival.
- **Trade** ran along the Uttarapatha and the coastal routes, with **Multan, Lahore, Delhi, Cambay, Calicut and Bengal** as the principal centres, and the **Karimi merchants** of Egypt linking Indian goods to the Mediterranean.
- **Commercial groups** included the Multanis and Marwaris in the north and the Gujarati Baniyas and Jains in the west, and they operated credit through hundis and served as bankers to the state.
- **Currency** was reformed by Iltutmish, who introduced the standard silver **tanka** and copper **jital**, and a functioning coinage across a large territory is itself evidence of commercial integration.

Women, caste and slavery

Named explicitly in the syllabus, and the section where the evidence requires the most care because it is largely elite and largely written by men.

- **Raziya Sultan**, ruling from 1236 to 1240, is the only woman to occupy the throne of Delhi, and Minhaj-us-Siraj's grudging praise, that she had every quality of a king except that she was a woman, is the standard quotation.
- Her fall came through the opposition of the Turkish nobility rather than through incapacity, and it illustrates the limits of individual achievement within a structurally closed elite.
- **Purdah** was practised among elite Hindu and Muslim households alike and functioned as a marker of status, so it was observed less strictly the further down the social scale one looked.
- **Peasant and artisan women** worked in the fields and at the spinning wheel, and the charkha in particular created substantial female employment that colonial deindustrialisation would later destroy.
- **Sati** continued among some Rajput and elite Hindu groups, and Ibn Battuta describes witnessing it with evident horror, which is among the fullest medieval accounts.
- **Bhakti and Sufi movements** offered women a religious role outside household authority, and Lal Ded in Kashmir and later Mirabai are the figures to name.
- **Caste** persisted with full force among the Hindu population, and conversion to Islam did not dissolve it, since converted groups largely retained their occupational identity and endogamy.
- That persistence is the key analytical point, since the arrival of a religion formally rejecting caste did not produce a caste-free society, and the reasons are occupational and social rather than doctrinal.
- **Slavery** was extensive, with slaves acquired by capture, purchase and enslavement for debt, and Firuz Shah's establishment of roughly 180,000 slaves organised as a department is the largest recorded.
- **Manumission** was religiously encouraged and did occur, and the career open to military slaves means slavery in this period must be described as a status rather than as a fixed condition.

Persian and regional literature

The Sultanate is where Persian becomes an Indian language and where the north Indian vernaculars begin their literary careers.

- **Amir Khusrau**, 1253 to 1325, is the outstanding figure, writing in Persian and in Hindavi, and calling himself the parrot of India.
- His works include the **Khamasa**, the historical masnavis such as *Qiran-us-Sadain* and *Tughlaq Nama*, and the **Nuh Siphir** which praises India, its languages and its learning.
- **Historical writing** in Persian is the period's richest genre, with **Minhaj's Tabaqat-i-Nasiri**, **Barani's Tarikh-i-Firoz Shahi** and **Fatwa-i-Jahandari**, **Afif's Tarikh-i-Firoz Shahi** and **Isami's Futuh-us-Salatin**.
- **Barani** is the most important and the most difficult source, since he writes as an aggrieved aristocrat and his hostility to low-born officeholders colours everything he reports.
- **Malfuzat**, the recorded conversations of Sufi masters such as Amir Hasan Sijzi's **Fawa'id-ul-Fuad** on Nizamuddin Auliya, are the best social source for the period because they record ordinary questions and answers.

- **Regional literature** in the north develops in this period, with early Hindavi, Awadhi and Braj emerging and the **premakhyan** Sufi romance tradition producing Maulana Daud's Chandayan.
- **Bengali** flourished under the Ilyas Shahi and Husain Shahi sultans, who patronised translations of Sanskrit epics, and **Kashmiri** through Lal Ded's vakhs.
- **Southern languages** developed independently, with Telugu under Vijayanagara patronage, Kannada through the Virashaiva vachanas, and Tamil continuing the devotional tradition.
- **Composite culture** is the syllabus's own term, and the evidence for it is Khusrau's Hindavi verse, the Sufi premakhyan romances, the shared musical forms and the vocabulary of Hindavi itself.

Architecture and painting

New structural forms are named in the syllabus, so the technical vocabulary is what pays here.

- **True arch and dome** were the decisive introduction, replacing the corbelled arch and the trabeate post-and-lintel of the Indian tradition, and they permitted much wider spans.
- Early buildings used **spolia**, material from demolished temples, and the **Qutb complex** with the Quwwat-ul-Islam mosque and the Qutb Minar begun by Aibak is the type case.
- **Alai Darwaza of 1311**, built by Alauddin Khalji, is the first building in India to use a true arch and dome on scientific principles, and it is the technical landmark of the period.
- **Tughlaq style** is austere and fortress-like, with battered sloping walls, minimal ornament and grey stone, and Tughlaqabad and the tomb of Ghiyasuddin Tughlaq are the examples.
- **Lodi style** develops the octagonal tomb and the double dome, the latter creating a proportionate exterior without an oppressive interior height, and it prefigures Mughal practice directly.
- **Materials and techniques** introduced include lime mortar, which permitted arcuate construction at scale, and the use of glazed tile in the later period.
- **Regional styles** developed distinctively, with Jaunpur's propylon, Gujarat's carving, Bengal's curved roof and brick, and Malwa's proportion, treated in the Fifteenth Century unit.
- **Painting** survives thinly, and the illustrated **Nimatnama** of Mandu and the Chaurapanchasika group are the principal examples, showing Persian influence combining with an indigenous idiom.
- The synthesis to state: Indian craftsmen executed Persian and Central Asian forms, so the result is neither imported nor indigenous but genuinely composite in its method of production.

The Bhakti and Sufi social world

Both movements are treated doctrinally in their own unit, so here concentrate on their social function.

- **Khanqah** functioned as a social institution well beyond the religious, offering food through the langar-like kitchen, shelter to travellers, and mediation in local disputes.
- **Chishti openness** meant the khanqah admitted people regardless of caste or religion, and its accessibility explains the order's popular reach far better than doctrine does.
- **Nizamuddin Auliya's** khanqah at Ghiaspur, described in the Fawaid-ul-Fuad, received a continuous stream of visitors from every social class, and Khusrau was among his disciples.
- **Dargah** and the **urs** observance created shared devotional spaces attended by Hindus and Muslims alike, and that shared attendance is the most concrete evidence of composite culture.

- **Bhakti saints** of the period, including Ramananda and his lineage and the Maharashtra sants, drew on artisan and low-caste groups whose occupational identity excluded them from Brahmanical ritual.
- **Vernacular preaching** by both movements is the social mechanism, since a religion argued in Awadhi or Marathi reaches people that Sanskrit and Arabic cannot.
- **Limits** should be stated plainly, since neither movement dissolved caste, the Sufi orders developed their own hierarchies of pir and murid, and several Bhakti panths hardened into castes.
- **Composite culture** as a category has been criticised as reading later secular hopes into medieval evidence, and acknowledging that criticism while defending the documented instances is the balanced position.

How the unit is examined

Three questions in four years, on Hindu and Muslim women, on peasant uprisings, and on the Qutub Complex. All three are social or cultural rather than political.

- The 2024 question comparing **Hindu and Muslim women** wants law, property, purdah, work and religious opportunity treated for both communities, with the caution that the evidence is overwhelmingly elite.
- Questions on **architecture** should name the structural innovation rather than describing appearance, so true arch, dome, lime mortar, double dome and octagonal tomb.
- Wherever **composite culture** appears, give three concrete instances rather than a general claim, and Khusrau, the premakhyan romances and the dargah are the strongest.
- On social questions, always distinguish **prescription from practice**, since the normative texts and the inscriptional or travel evidence frequently disagree.
- Cite **Barani, Afif, Ibn Battuta and the malfuzat** by name, since source specificity is what separates a top-band medieval answer from a competent one.

Last-mile revision

- Iqta and muqti, khalisa, khut muqaddam chaudhuri, balahar; Firuz makes iqtas hereditary; haqq-i-sharb at ten per cent.
- Chalisa under Iltutmish, Khalji revolution 1290, slave elites from Aibak and Iltutmish, Firuz's 180,000 slaves.
- Technologies: charkha, treadle loom, saqiya with gearing, paper, true arch and dome; Iltutmish's tanka and jital.
- Raziya 1236-40 and Minhaj's quotation; purdah as status marker; sati described by Ibn Battuta.
- Persian: Khusrau 1253-1325 and Nuh Siphir; Minhaj, Barani, Afif, Isami; Fawaid-ul-Fuad on Nizamuddin.
- Architecture: Qutb complex with spolia, Alai Darwaza 1311 first true arch and dome, Tughlaq battered walls, Lodi octagonal tomb and double dome.

Common errors to avoid

- Treating Sultanate slavery as plantation slavery. Military and administrative slaves held enormous power and founded dynasties.
- Saying conversion to Islam dissolved caste. Converted groups largely retained occupation and endogamy, which is the analytically important fact.
- Describing Sultanate architecture by appearance. Name the structural innovation: true arch, dome, lime mortar, double dome.
- Dating the first true arch to the Qutb Minar. The Alai Darwaza of 1311 is the landmark.
- Using Barani as a neutral source. He writes as an aggrieved aristocrat hostile to low-born officeholders.
- Asserting composite culture without instances. Give Khusrau, the premakhyan romances and the dargah rather than a general claim.

Mains Practice

Compare and contrast the position of Hindu and Muslim women in thirteenth- and fourteenth-century India.

15 marks · 200 words · 2024

Examine the causes and consequences of peasant uprisings during the reign concerned.

15 marks · 200 words · 2024

How far can the Qutub Complex at Mehrauli be considered an ideal specimen for the study of architecture under the Delhi Sultanate?

10 marks · 150 words · 2026