

Islamic Conquest of North India and the Gangetic Plains

The Islamic conquest of northern India is an important part of Indian history that affected significantly the politics, religion, arts, architecture, literature and other domains of life on the subcontinent. In this article on medieval Indian history for the [IAS exam](#), you can read all about the Islamic conquest of Northern India and the Gangetic Plains.

The Religion Islam

The religion Islam was born in Mecca in Arabia (in the 7th century CE). Its founder was Prophet Muhammad. The religion believes in one God - Allah and Prophet Muhammad is His messenger. According to Islam, the holy book Quran was revealed by Allah to the Prophet Muhammad and there are five tenets of Islam that serve as a basic guide as to how Muslims should live their lives. The five tenets are Shahadah, Salah (offering prayers five times a day), Saum (observing fast during the month of Ramadan), Zakat (giving alms) and Hajj (holy pilgrimage to Mecca once in life, if possible).

After the death of the Prophet (c. 632 CE), the task of providing religious and political leadership to the Muslims passed on to the Caliphs (Islamic leaders) known as Rashidun (rightly guided). The word Caliph is derived from the Arabic word “Khalifa” which means deputy and was the title given to the rulers who succeeded Prophet Muhammad. The Umayyads and the Abbasids were called the Caliphs. They expanded their rule by conquests and spread their religion Islam.

Invasion of Sindh

- Muhammad bin Qasim invaded Sindh (north-west region of India) in c.712 CE. He was the general of the Umayyad Caliphate.
- Qasim defeated Dahir, the ruler of Sindh in a well-contested battle.
- His capital Alor was captured and Qasim extended his conquest further into Multan (near Indus river and parts of lower Punjab).
- This military conquest is mentioned in the Chachnama, an early 13th-century Persian translation of an old Arabic history of Bin Qasim.
- Though his rule lasted for only two years, yet it greatly disturbed the economic life of Sindh and a large number of people and merchants fled from Sindh.
- However, many Arabs settled down in Sindh and the Arab influence continued for a long time.

Ghaznavids and Mahmud of Ghazni

By the end of the 9th century CE, the Abbasid Caliphate declined and the Turkish governors established independent kingdoms and the Caliph became only a ritual authority. One among them was Alptagin who established an independent Turkish dynasty with its capital at Ghazni, Afghanistan. He was

succeeded by his son-in-law Subuktagin in 977 CE. Subuktagin was succeeded by his son Mahmud - the first ruler who was titled 'Sultan'.

Muhammad bin Qasim (c. 712 CE)

- He was the first Muslim invader who invaded Sindh.

The Ghaznavids

Subuktagin (c. 977 - 998 CE)

- He succeeded in capturing Peshawar from Jayapala (Hindu Shahi dynasty).

Mahmud of Ghazni (c. 998 - 1030 CE)

- Mahmud is said to have made seventeen raids into India between 1000 - 1027 CE. The Rajput power had declined when Mahmud started his invasions in India. The motives of Mahmud behind his conquests were-
 - He wanted to gather the immense wealth of India and use it in transforming his capital city, Ghazni into a powerful region in entire Central Asia. Also, with the help of his plundered wealth, he could continue his struggle against his enemies in Central Asia.
 - His aim was to spread the religion of Islam and to destroy Hindu temples. He is also known as Shikan, destroyer of images.
- His initial raids were against the Hindu Shahi kingdom in which its king Jayapala was defeated in the Battle of Waihind. After the defeat, Jayapala immolated himself because he thought his defeat was a disgrace.
- Jayapala's successor, Anandapala fought against Mahmud but he was also defeated in the Second Battle of Waihind, the Hindu Shahi capital near Peshawar, in c.1008 CE. In this battle, Anandapala was supported by the rulers of Kannauj and Rajasthan. As a result of his victory at Waihind, Mahmud extended his rule over most of Punjab.
- In c. 1014 CE, Mahmud raided Thaneshwar near Delhi and also burnt the temple of Mathura.
- In c. 1018 CE, he attacked Kannauj and defeated its king Vidhyadhara, the Chandella king. He also conquered Rahib and Lahore by defeating and killing its rulers, the Hindu Shahi Trilochanapala and his son Bhimapala.
- In c. 1025 CE, he raided Somnath temple in Kathiawar, Saurashtra. This was his 16th expedition. It was the Chalukyan ruler of Gujarat, Bhima I who later repaired the temple.
- In c. 1026 CE, he punished Jats for colluding against him.
- Mahmud of Ghazni patronised art and literature. Firdausi was the poet laureate in the court of Mahmud. He was also called "Homer of the East" and was the author of Shahnama. Al-Biruni stayed in Mahmud's court and wrote the famous Kitab-ul-Hind, an account of India.

- In c. 1030 CE, Mahmud of Ghazni died. After his death, a powerful empire called the Seljuk empire came into being, which included Syria, Trans Oxiana and Iran. The Seljuk empire fought with the Ghaznavids for the control of Khorasan. In a famous battle, Masud, the son of Mahmud was defeated and he took refuge in Lahore. The Ghaznavid empire was now confined to Ghazni and Punjab.

The seventeen invasions by Mahmud of Ghazni completely changed the political situation in India. He paved the way for the Turks and Afghans for further conquests and make deeper incursions into the Gangetic valley at any time. He drained the immense resources of India by his repeated raids which adversely affected the political future of India. The inclusion of Punjab and Afghanistan in Ghazni's kingdom made the Indian frontiers weak and opened the gates of India to be conquered from the north west.

Ghurid Dynasty and Muhammad Ghori

The Ghurid dynasty started as vassals of Ghazni but became independent after the death of Ghazni. The Ghurid Empire was based in Ghur in northwest Afghanistan. The power of Ghurids increased under Sultan Alauddin who earned the title of 'the world burner' (Jahan soz) because during the middle of the 12th century he ravaged Ghazni and burnt it to the ground to avenge the treatment meted out to his brothers at Ghazni.

In c. 1173 CE, Shahabuddin Muhammad (also known as Muiz-ud-din Muhammad bin Sam), particularly known as Muhammad Ghori ascended the throne at Ghazni while his elder brother ruled at Ghur. He is considered one of the greatest rulers of the Ghurid dynasty and laid the foundation of Muslim rule in India as well as in South Asia. Being ambitious he wanted to expand his territory and therefore, turned his attention towards India. He carried out a number of invasions to establish his rule over India, unlike Mahmud of Ghazni who was more interested in accumulating the wealth that existed in India. Muhammad Ghori's political achievements in India were greater than that of Mahmud, however, Mahmud of Ghazni was a more successful warrior.

Muhammad Ghori (c. 1173 - 1206 CE)

- Muhammad Ghori made seven major invasions against India and is considered to be the real founder of the Islamic empire in India.
- In c.1175 CE, Muhammad Ghori captured Multan and occupied Uchh (in upper Sindh) in his subsequent expedition.
- In c.1178 CE, he attempted to penetrate into Gujarat by marching across the Rajputana desert but the Gujarat Chalukyan ruler, Solanki Bhima II completely defeated him at the Battle of Kayadara (near Mount Abu). He now realised the necessity of creating a suitable base in Punjab before venturing on the further conquest of India. Accordingly, he launched a campaign against the

Ghaznavid possessions in Punjab. By c.1190 CE, Muhammad Ghori had conquered Peshawar, Lahore and Sialkot and was ready to make advances towards Delhi and the Gangetic doab.

- After the annexation of Punjab, Muhammad Ghori attempted to advance into Gangetic doab which brought him into conflict with Prithviraj Chauhan, the Rajput ruler. Prithviraj Chauhan after capturing Delhi and other small Rajputana states wanted to exercise control over Punjab and Ganga valley. The conflict started with the claims over Tabarhinda (Bhatinda). In the first battle fought at Tarain (present Haryana) in c. 1191 CE, Ghori was completely defeated and Prithviraj Chauhan conquered Bhatinda. To avenge his defeat Muhammad Ghori made serious preparations and gathered a huge army.
 - In the second battle of Tarain (c. 1192 CE), Prithviraj Chauhan was defeated and Ghori emerged victorious. Although the Indian army was huge in number, the Turkish forces were well organised with a swift-moving cavalry. The use of horse shoes and iron stirrup favoured the Turkish forces. Prithviraj Chauhan escaped but was captured. He was allowed to rule over Ajmer for some time as the coins pertaining to this period bear the legend 'Prithvirajadeva' on one side and 'Sri Muhammad Sam' on the other. However, soon, Prithviraj Chauhan was executed on charges of conspiracy. After the Battle of Tarain, Muhammad Ghori returned to Ghazni leaving the affairs in India in the hands of one of his trusted slave, Qutub-ud-din Aibak.
 - The Turkish captured the fortresses of Saraswati, Hansi, Samana, Delhi and Ajmer.
 - In c. 1194 CE, Muhammad Ghori returned to India and fought a battle with Jaichandra, the ruler of Kannauj, of the Gahadavala dynasty at Chandawar (near Kannauj) in which Jaichandra was defeated and killed. The battle of Tarain and Chandawar laid the foundation of Turkish rule in north India.
 - In c. 1195 CE, Qutub-ud-din Aibak conquered Aligarh and Ranthambore. In his second battle with Bhima II, Aibak conquered Gujarat. He also conquered Bundelkhand, ruled by the Chandella Rajputs.
 - In c. 1197 CE, Muhammad Bhakhtiyar Khilji (General of Muhammad Ghori) captured Bihar and in c. 1202 CE, he captured Bengal. He destroyed the universities of Vikramshila and Nalanda. He became Viceroy of Bihar and Bengal.
 - Muhammad Ghori led his last campaign into India in c. 1206 CE in order to deal with the Khokhar rebellion. He resorted to a large-scale slaughter of the Khokhars and cowed them down. On his way back to Ghazni, he was killed by a Muslim fanatic belonging to a rival sect. The reign of India passed on to Aibak, who laid the foundation of the slave dynasty.
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