

Mughal Empire [UPSC Medieval History Notes]

The Mughal Empire ruled over a good part of India from the 16th century to the 19th century with their imperial power declining in the 18th century. This is an important topic for the [UPSC exam](#) history segment. In this article, you can read all about the establishment of the Mughal Empire, its emperors Babur and Humayun, and also about Sher Shah Suri, who had replaced the Mughal Empire for a brief period.

The Mughal Empire (c. 1526 - 1857 CE)

The Mughal Empire was founded by Babur, a Central Asian ruler. His original name was Zahiruddin Muhammad. He was related to Timur (the founder of the Timurid dynasty) on his father's side and to Chengiz Khan (Mongol ruler) through his mother. The Mughals are also referred to as Timurids because they are considered descendants of Timur. In c. 1494 CE, Babur, at the young age of 12, succeeded his father Umar Shaikh Mirza as the ruler of Farghana, a small principality in Transoxiana. Babur won the city of Samarqand twice but lost it in no time on both occasions. The second time, the Uzbek chief, Shaibani Khan defeated Babur and conquered Samarqand. Soon, the Uzbeks overran the rest of the Timurid kingdoms including Farghana. This forced Babur to move towards Kabul which he captured in c. 1504 CE. Like countless earlier invaders from Central Asia, Babur too was drawn towards India due to its enormous wealth.

Babur (c. 1526 - 1530 CE)

Babur was the founder of the Mughal Empire in India.

- He established himself first in Kabul (c. 1504 CE) and then moved from Afghanistan into India through the Khyber Pass. Babur conquered the powerful fort of Bhira (c. 1519 - 1520 CE), Sialkot (c. 1520 CE) and Lahore in Punjab. The main reason why Babur coveted the Punjab parganas was the meagre income of Kabul, which was insufficient to maintain an empire. He was also apprehensive of an Uzbek attack on Kabul and considered India to be a good place of refuge and a suitable base for operations against the Uzbeks. The unstable political situation after the death of Sikander Lodhi in c. 1517 CE further helped his entry into India.
- It is believed that Babur was invited to fight against Ibrahim Lodhi (son of Sikander Lodhi) by Daulat Khan Lodhi (governor of Punjab), Rana Sanga of Mewar and Alam Khan (uncle of Ibrahim Lodhi). They convinced Babur that the time was ripe for the conquest of the whole of Punjab.

Also read: [Delhi Sultanate](#)

The First Battle of Panipat (c. 1526 CE)

- The Battle of Panipat is considered one of the decisive battles of Indian history and it was fought between Babur and Ibrahim Lodhi.
- It broke the back of Lodhi power and brought under Babur's control the entire region up to Delhi and Agra.
- He also got the rich treasures stored by Ibrahim Lodhi at Agra.
- In this battle, Babur's army was numerically inferior. Ibrahim Lodhi's army consisted of 100,000 men and 1000 elephants.
- Babur had crossed the Indus with an army of only 12000 soldiers. However, the military tactics were efficient and bore results.
- Babur used the Ottoman (Rumi) method of warfare, wherein he encircled Lodhi's army from both flanks.
 - From the centre, his cavalry mounted an attack with arrows and gunners under expert Ottoman gunners - Ustad Ali and Mustafa, whereas the trenches and barricades provided ample defense against the march of the enemy.
- After emerging victorious at the battle of Panipat, Babur proclaimed himself as the 'Emperor of Hindustan'.
- After the battle of Panipat, Babur had to face many difficulties. His nobles and commanders were not prepared for a long campaign in India. They wanted to return to Central Asia and the hot climate of India added to their misery.
- Babur's decision to stay on in India completely changed the situation and he invited the hostility of Rana Sanga. The Rana had expected Babur to return to Kabul and his decision to stay in India was a big jolt to Rana Sanga's territorial ambitions. Thus, the battle between the two became inevitable.

Read more on the [First Battle of Panipat](#) in the linked article.

Battle of Khanwa (c. 1527 CE)

- This fierce battle was fought between Babur and Rana Sanga of Mewar and his allies, near Fatehpur Sikri.
- Many Afghans, including Mahmud Lodhi, the younger brother of Ibrahim Lodhi, supported Rana Sangha.
- He also got support from a large number of Rajput chiefs, of which prominent were the Rajputs of Jalore, Dungarpur, Amber and Sirohi along with Raja Medini Rai of Chanderi in Malwa and Hasan Khan of Mewar.
- Babur declared the war against Sanga to be a jihad.
- Rana Sanga, one of the most valiant warriors of Rajasthan, was defeated and thus, the [Battle of Khanwa](#) secured Babur's position in the Delhi-Agra region.

- After his victory, he adopted the title of Ghazi. He strengthened his position further by capturing a chain of forts in Gwalior, Dholpur and east of Agra. He also annexed large parts of Alwar from Hasan Khan Mewati.

Battle of Chanderi (c. 1528 CE)

- Babur led a campaign against Medini Rai of Chanderi in Malwa.
- Chanderi was captured with ease and with this defeat, the resistance across Rajputana was completely shattered.
- Babur had to cut short his plan of further campaigns due to the growing activities of the Afghans in eastern Uttar Pradesh.

Battle of Ghagra (c. 1529 CE)

- This battle was fought between Babur and the Afghans near Bihar.
- The Afghans fought under the leadership of Mahmud Lodhi, a younger brother of Ibrahim Lodhi, and were also backed by Nusrat Shah, the ruler of Bengal.
- Babur faced the combined forces of the Afghans and Nusrat Shah of Bengal at the crossing of the river Ghagra.
- Although Babur crossed the river and made the Afghan and Bengal forces retreat, he could not win a decisive victory.
- Soon afterwards Babur died in c. 1530 CE at the age of 47 in Agra while on his way to Kabul. He was buried in Arambagh in Agra and later his body was taken to Kabul.

Know more about [Babur](#) in the linked article.

Significance of Babur's advent into India

- For the first time since the downfall of the Kushan empire, Kabul and Qandahar became integral parts of the Mughal empire. By dominating them, Babur and his successors were able to protect India from external invasions for almost 200 years. The control over Kabul and Qandahar also strengthened trans-Asian foreign trade, since these two towns were the starting points for caravans meant for China in the east and the Mediterranean seaports in the west.
- Babur defeated the Lodhis and smashed the Rajput confederacy led by Rana Sanga. This was a big step towards the establishment of an all-India empire.
- A new mode of warfare was introduced by Babur in India. His victories led to the rapid popularisation of gunpowder and artillery in India.
- He re-established the prestige of the Crown in Delhi, which had been eroded since the death of Firoz Shah Tughlaq.
- He was always prepared to share the hardships with his soldiers.

- Though an orthodox Sunni, Babur was neither bigoted nor led by religious divides. He was a devoted follower of Naqshbandiya Sufi Khwaja Ubaidullah Ahrar.
- Babur was well versed in Persian and Arabic. He wrote his memoir in Turki, his mother tongue, the Tuzuk-i-Baburi/Baburnama and his work also includes a Masnavi.
- He was a keen naturalist and has described the flora and fauna of India. He laid out a number of formal gardens with running water thereby establishing a tradition of building gardens.

Humayun (c. 1530 - 1556 CE)

Humayun succeeded Babur in December 1530 at the young age of 23. Humayun means fortune but he is considered to be the most unfortunate ruler of the Mughal Empire. He had to struggle with a number of problems left behind by his father. The administration had not yet been consolidated and the finances were precarious. He had to face the hostility of the Afghans and other provincial rulers as they were not fully subdued. This included Bahadur Shah, provincial ruler of Gujarat and Sher Khan, a powerful Afghan of Bengal. Finally, there was the Timurid tradition of sharing the powers with his brothers which created multiple centres of power. Kabul, Qandahar and Punjab were under the charge of Humayun's younger brother, Kamran. Hindal controlled Alwar and Mewat and Mirza Askari held Sambhal.

- In c. 1532 CE at Dadrah, Humayun defeated the Afghan forces which had conquered Bihar and overrun Jaunpur in eastern Uttar Pradesh. Then he besieged Chunar, a powerful fort that commanded the land and the river route between Agra and the east. This was called the gateway of eastern India and it was under the control of the most powerful Afghan leader, Sher Khan. Humayun signed a treaty with Sher Khan leaving him in full control of the area east of Banaras and also the possession of the fort, in return, Sher Khan promised to be loyal towards the Mughals. The most probable reason for signing this treaty was the advance of Bahadur Shah, ruler of Gujarat towards the Mughal frontiers (Rajputana and Malwa). In such a situation Humayun rushed back to Agra.
- Marching towards Malwa, Humayun seized Mandu and then stormed Champaner and Ahmedabad. The rich provinces of Malwa and Gujarat, as well as the large treasures hoarded by the Gujarat rulers at Mandu and Champaner, fell into the hands of Humayun. Humayun placed Gujarat under the command of his younger brother, Askari and he returned to Mandu. However, both Gujarat and Malwa were lost as quickly as they had been gained. Askari was inexperienced and the rapid revival of Bahadur Shah's power unnerved Askari and he fled to Agra. The only advantage gained from the Gujarat campaign was that it destroyed forever the threat posed to the Mughals by Bahadur Shah and Humayun could concentrate all his resources in the struggle against Sher Khan and the Afghans.
- Meanwhile, Sher Khan strengthened his position and became the unquestionable master of Bihar. Humayun marched against Sher Khan and despite the best efforts, it took him six months to besiege Chunar. Sher Khan captured the powerful fort of Rohtas by treachery where he left his family safely. He then invaded Bengal and captured Gaur, its capital. After his victory over

Gaur, Sher Khan made an offer to Humayun that he would surrender Bihar and pay an annual tribute of 10 lakh dinars if he was allowed to retain Bengal. However, Humayun rejected the offer as Bengal was the land of gold, rich in manufactures and a centre for foreign trade.

- In the Battle of Chausa, near Buxar (c. 1539 CE), Sher Khan defeated Humayun and adopted the title of Sher Shah. Humayun escaped from the battlefield swimming across the river with the help of a water carrier.
- After the battle of Chausa, only the fullest unity among the Timurid princes and the nobles could have saved the Mughals. Kamran did not support Humayun and moved out of Agra to Lahore with the bulk of his army. The army hastily assembled by Humayun at Agra was no match against Sher Khan. Askari and Hindal, younger brothers of Humayun, fought bravely but Humayun was defeated at the battle of Kannauj/battle of Bilgrama (c. 1540 CE). This battle decided the issue between Sher Khan and the Mughals. Humayun, now, became a prince without a kingdom and had to flee from Delhi, and became an exile for the next fifteen years (c.1540-1555 CE).
- For the next two and a half years (after the battle of Kannauj) he wandered about in Sindh and its neighbouring areas, hatching various schemes to regain his kingdom. On his way to Sindh, he married Hamida Banu Begum (daughter of Hindal's teacher). They stayed at Amarkot, a Hindu kingdom ruled by Rana Prasad and in c. 1542 CE, Akbar was born to them. Later Humayun took shelter at the court of the Iranian king and with his help captured Qandahar and Kabul in c. 1545 CE.
- In c. 1555 CE, following the breakup of the Sur Empire, he recovered the Mughal throne. However, he did not live long and died (in c. 1556 CE) from a fall from the first floor of the library building in his fort at Delhi. His wife, Haji Begum built a magnificent mausoleum for him near the fort.
- One of his loyal officers, Bairam Khan, helped him to come back to India.
- Gulbadan Begum, his half sister wrote Humayun-nama.
- He built a new city named Dinapanah in Delhi.

Know more about [Humayun](#) in the linked article.

The Afghan Interlude/Sur Interregnum (c. 1540 - 1555 CE)

Sher Shah Suri (c. 1486 - 1545 CE)

- The founder of the Sur dynasty and also the second Afghan empire (after the Lodhis) whose original name was Farid. He was the son of Hasan Khan, a jagirdar of Sasaram in south Bihar (Jaunpur). Later, Farid served under the Afghan governor of Bihar, Bahar Khan Lohani, who gave him the title of Sher Khan for his bravery (as he killed a tiger).
- He acquired great administrative skills by managing the affairs of his father's jagir. He defeated Sultan Mahmud Shah of Bengal at the battle of Surajgarh and became the most powerful Afghan

military commander in the eastern province. He defeated Mughal emperor Humayun in the battle of Chausa (c. 1539 CE) and took the title of Sher Shah. He again defeated Humayun in the battle of Kannauj (c. 1540 CE) and declared himself as Emperor of Hindustan at the age of 54.

- Sher Shah ruled a mighty empire which extended from Bengal to the Indus (except Kashmir). In the west he conquered Malwa (in c. 1542 CE) and almost the entire Rajasthan. Maldeo was the ruler of Marwar who brought the whole of western and northern Rajasthan under his control. Sher Shah defeated Maldeo in the famous Battle of Samel (between Ajmer and Jodhpur) in c. 1544 CE. The battle of Samel sealed the fate of Rajasthan, Sher Shah then conquered Ajmer, Jodhpur and Mewar. The last campaign was against Kalinjar (a strong fort that was key to Bundelkhand) in which he succeeded but died from an accidental explosion of gunpowder in c. 1545 CE.
- Sher Shah was tolerant towards other faiths, he employed Hindus at important positions.
- He patronised art and architecture. He built the Purana Qila (old fort), Sher Mandal - an octagonal building inside the Purana Qila complex. He also built the Rohtas Fort (a [UNESCO World Heritage Site](#) in Pakistan), many structures in the Rohtasgarh Fort in Bihar and Sher Shah Suri masjid in Patna.
- Sher Shah was succeeded by his son, Islam Shah, who ruled till c. 1553 CE. He had to face a number of conflicts with his brothers and many Afghan nobles. His death led to a civil war among his successors. This provided Humayun the opportunity he had been seeking for recovering his empire in India. In c. 1555 CE, Humayun defeated the Afghans and recovered Delhi and Agra.

Read more on the [Sur Dynasty](#) in the linked article.

Sher Shah's Administration (c. 1540 - 1545 CE)

Although his rule lasted for only five years, he established a well-organized administrative system. The government was highly centralized and consisted of several departments. The king was assisted by four important ministers -

1. Diwan-i-Rasalat: Foreign minister
2. Diwan-i-Wazarat: In-charge of revenue and finance, also called wazir
3. Diwan-i- Ariz: In-charge of the army
4. Diwan-i-Insha: Minister for communication

The empire consisted of 47 sarkars. In each sarkar, there were two officers, Chief Munsif (judge) and Chief Shiqdar (law and order) who controlled the administration. Each sarkar consisted of several parganas. Amil (land revenue), fotedar (treasurer), shiqdar (military officer) and karkuns (accountants) controlled the administration of each pargana. Village (Mauza) was the lowest level of administration. There were also many administrative units called iqtas.

- The land revenue was well organised and revenue officers were called Amils while Qanungo were the officers in-charge of maintaining revenue records. Land assessment was done every year and all cultivable lands were classified into three categories - good, middle and bad. The state's share was one-third of the average produce and it was either to be paid in cash or crop. The area sown, the type of crops cultivated and the amount each peasant had to pay was written on a document called Patta.
- Sher Shah introduced new copper coins called Dam and these were in circulation till c. 1835 CE. He also introduced silver Rupayia (1 Rupayia = 64 Dams) and gold coin (Ashrafi/Mohur).
- Sher Shah also improved communication by laying four important highways. They were:
 - Sonargaon (in Bengal) to Sindh --- Sher Shah restored the old imperial road called “The Grand Trunk Road” (by Ashoka).
 - Agra to Burhampur.
 - Jodhpur to Chittor.
 - Lahore to Multan.

Rest houses (sarais) were built at a distance of every two kos (8 km) on the highways for the convenience of travellers. Every sarai was guarded by watchmen who were under the control of a Shahna (custodian). His roads and sarais have been called “the arteries of the empire”. Police was efficiently organized and crime was less during his reign.

- Sher Shah also introduced other reforms to promote the growth of trade and commerce. In his entire empire, customs duty for goods were paid at two places - goods produced in Bengal or imported from outside paid custom duty at the border of Bengal and Bihar at Sikrigali, and goods coming from west and Central Asia paid customs duty at the Indus. The duty was paid a second time at the time of sale of goods. Local village headmen (muqaddams) and zamindars were made responsible for any loss that a merchant suffered on the roads.
 - Sher Shah set up a strong army in order to administer his empire. He borrowed the branding system (chehra and dagh) from Alauddin Khalji.
 - He laid great emphasis on justice. Qazis were appointed at different places for administering justice. At the local level, the village panchayats and zamindars dealt with civil and criminal cases. Sher Shah’s son, Islam Shah codified the laws which was a big step forward in the dispensation of justice.
-