

History of Islam

An encyclopedia of Islamic history

Babur in Delhi

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Zahiruddin Muhammed Babur (1483-1530), founder of the Moghul dynasty in the subcontinent, was a descendant of Timur from his father's side and of Genghiz Khan from his mother's side. Since Timur himself was a Tatar and married into a Birlas Turkish family, it may also be claimed that Babur was a Turk. The word Moghul is a Farsi corruption for Mongol, and it stayed with Babur's dynasty, even though the house of Babur preferred an association with the name of his great great grandfather, Timur, and called themselves Timurids.

In the year 1500, the India-Pakistan subcontinent was a border state in the larger Islamic world. It was somewhat insulated from Central Asia due to its geography-the high Hindu Kush Mountains and the difficult passes on the Pakistan-Afghanistan border. But it was a prize that no would-be conqueror could disregard. The rich Indo-Gangetic plains and the southern highlands of the Deccan were net exporters of goods up until the 18th century. Since ancient times, the spices, ivory, iron and manufactured goods of the subcontinent were valued all over the world. Traders from the Roman Empire, and later from the Islamic Empire based in Baghdad, carried on a brisk trade with the western coast of India. To the northwest, the Silk Road to China and the land route to Tabriz brimmed with commercial activity. The traders paid for the spices in gold and silver, and so the subcontinent had a net surplus inflow of precious metals. Much of the wealth found its way to the rulers, and the principal cities such as Delhi, Lahore, Multan, Surat and Dacca. These cities became rich prizes for a potential conqueror. It was for this reason that India was plundered time and again by invaders in search of loot. Often, the conquerors liked the easy life of Hindustan, settled down and founded new dynasties. Sometimes, as it happened with Timur (1400) and Nadir Shah (1739), they just took the loot and departed. Others, like the British, took the loot and stayed as long as they could to continuously exploit the land.

The collapse of the Timurid Empire threw Central and West Asia into turmoil. Out of this turmoil new empires were born. Shah Ismail I, the head of the Safaviyya brotherhood, successfully consolidated his power in Persia and founded the Safavid dynasty. Zahiruddin Babur, a Timurid prince, was a contemporary of Shah Ismail. He was the son of Omar Shaykh, a Timurid prince who had inherited the bountiful valley of Farghana, including Timur's capital city of Samarqand. Omar Shaykh, who ruled Farghana from the town of Andijan, died in 1494 when Babur was a boy of eleven. In the usual Timurid tradition, there was a scramble among Omar Shaykh's brothers and sons to grab the throne. Babur's uncle Sultan Ahmed was the first to make his move. But Ahmed's sudden death, and the incapability of his sons, left Babur in possession of Farghana and Samarqand. The infighting continued with Babur and his brother Jehangir jostling for advantage. Meanwhile, to the east of Farghana, a powerful Uzbek

kingdom had arisen, headed by Muhammed Shaibani Khan (1451-1510). The Uzbeks expanded to the north at the expense of the Mongols, and to the west at the expense of the Timurids. Taking advantage of the infighting in the House of Timur, Shaibani invaded Farghana in 1501, defeated Babur at the of Sar-e-Pul, and occupied Samarqand. Babur fled and for three years wandered around the hills of Afghanistan and the plains of Khorasan. He made several attempts to recapture Samarqand but each time suffered defeat at the hands of Shaibani. Babur, and his descendants the Great Moghuls of Delhi, never gave up their claims on Samarqand. As late as 1630, Emperor Shah Jehan, great-grandson of Babur, launched an unsuccessful expedition from Agra to recapture Samarqand.

In the political turmoil of the times, there were always opportunities for an enterprising prince. Babur found a home in Kabul, which he took in 1504. Meanwhile, the Uzbek advance continued southward. In 1505, Shaibani invaded the territories of Hussain Baiqara, another Timurid prince, who ruled from the city of Herat. In response to a request for help from Baiqara, Babur advanced towards Herat but withdrew because Baiqara died (1506) before Babur could reach there. The Uzbeks continued their advance in Khorasan, taking Merv and Nishapur as they went. The Uzbek capture of Khorasan brought Shah Ismail himself into the fray. In 1510, Ismail advanced into Khorasan at the head of a large army. During this period Babur fought on the side of the Safavid troops against Shaibani Khan. Notwithstanding the alliance between the Safavid Shah Ismail I and Babur, Shaibani was victorious. Turning south, the Uzbeks occupied Qandahar and threatened the home base of Babur in Kabul both from the north and the south. Fortunately for Babur, Shaibani withdrew from Qandahar after accepting a tribute from the local inhabitants and was killed the same year in a skirmish with the Turkomans.

After the death of Shaibani, the Persians successfully reclaimed Khorasan. In return for the help he had received, Shah Ismail permitted Babur to keep any territory in Afghanistan and Farghana that he would wrest from the Uzbeks. Ismail withdrew from Khorasan leaving his general Yar Ahmed Khuzani as the Governor. The independent spirit of Babur found it unacceptable to live with the overlordship of the Safavids. Babur was appalled by the heavy-handedness with which Khuzani forced Ithna Ashari tenets on the predominantly Sunni population of Herat, and the brutality with which he killed the inhabitants of conquered cities. In 1512, at the Battle of Ghuzduvan, Babur withheld his support of the Safavids. The Uzbeks were victorious and Khuzani was killed in the battle.

Disappointed with his attempts to recapture Samarqand, and with the military-political turmoil in Central Asia, Babur turned his attention east towards Hindustan. He considered the throne of Delhi to be his by virtue of his legacy from Timur. Delhi was at this time ruled by Ibrahim Lodhi (1517-1526), the last of a dynasty, which had ruled India since 1450. Ibrahim, unlike his father Sikandar Lodhi, was a political dwarf who could not manage the intrigues in the Delhi court. India was rife with instability. Bengal and Punjab were in revolt. The Rajputs under Rana Sangha were up in arms.

Babur made several incursions into India through the Khyber Pass and found the military climate favorable. An opportunity to cross the Indus arose when Daulat Khan, governor of Punjab, sought Babur's help against Ibrahim Lodhi. The year 1525 saw Babur's armies in Lahore. The following year, he advanced towards Delhi at the head of 18,000 cavalymen, well armed with muskets and supported by a phalanx of Turkish cannon. Ibrahim Lodhi met him on the plains of Panipat in April 1526 with his huge army of over 100,000, backed by war elephants. The Moghul advantage in firearms carried the day. As Babur's artillery fell on the elephants, they turned around and trampled the Indian infantry. Ibrahim Lodhi died on the battlefield. Babur was in Delhi and the Moghul Empire was born.

Babur advanced along the Gangetic plains, captured Agra (1526), and moved into Kanauj. The following year (1527), in a pitched battle at Khanua, he overcame the combined resistance of the Rajputs under Rana Sangha of Mewar, and of some of the local Muslim chieftains. Ibrahim Lodhi's brother Mahmud

Lodhi escaped from Panipat and raised an army in Bengal. In 1529, this resistance was crushed and Babur became the undisputed Emperor of Hindustan.

The Battle of Panipat in 1526 is a turning point in global history. With Babur's victory, the Delhi Sultanate, which had been established in 1192 by Muhammed Ghori, came to an end. Its place was taken by the Great Moghul Empire which consolidated the territories of South Asia and left as its legacy the culture, art, architecture, administration, music, language, cuisine and customs of modern India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Afghanistan.

It was the Moghul period that witnessed the first commercial contacts with European powers, which in due course changed the history of Europe and Asia alike. Babur was not only a tireless soldier and a consummate leader, but a great writer as well. His memoirs collected under *Babur Nama*, are considered one of the greatest testaments of a ruler, and occupy a place in world historiography alongside the memoirs of Caesar. His poignant death brings out not only the sensitivity of his soul, but also the predominant Sufic bent of his times. In 1530, his son Humayun fell ill. The best that medical science had to offer did not cure him and all hope was lost. Babur raised his hands in prayer to the Almighty, and beseeching Him to spare the life of his son, begged to take his life instead. It is related that after the prayer, Babur went around his dying son's bed seven times, each time repeating his supplication. He died soon thereafter, while his son recovered and became the next Emperor of Hindustan.

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