

# History of Islam

An encyclopedia of Islamic history

## Delhi, the Conquest of

### The Conquest of Delhi

**Contributed by Prof. Dr. Nazeer Ahmed, PhD**

For a brief moment, towards the end of the 12<sup>th</sup> century, the Muslim world was politically united under one caliph ruling from Baghdad. This political unity, rare in Islamic history, projected itself on the military plane. In West Asia, the Crusaders were ejected from Palestine, Lebanon and Syria. Salahuddin recaptured Jerusalem in 1187. Four years later, in 1191, Muhammed Ghori of Ghazna crossed the Indus, defeated Prithvi Raj Chauhan of Delhi and Ajmer and conquered Hindustan. Five years after this momentous conquest, in 1196, the Al Muhaddith Yaqub al Mansur, won a decisive victory against the Crusaders at the Battle of Alarcos. For about thirty years, Muslim power was unchallenged on the globe.

Five years after the Battle of Hittin (1186) in which Salahuddin routed the Crusaders, another battle of equal historical importance was fought at Tarain on the plains of the Punjab between Muhammed Ghori of Ghazna and Prithvi Raj Chauhan of Delhi. The outcome of this battle paved the way for the establishment of the Delhi Sultanate. It was the first gambit in the creation of an Islamic community in the subcontinent which today numbers more than 500 million and is by far the largest Islamic community in the world.

The vast Indian subcontinent of 1192 was a divided land rent asunder by the mutual passions and jealousies of the ruling Rajput princes. Prithvi Raj, a dashing prince of the Chauhan dynasty, who had an equal penchant for love and war, ruled Delhi and Ajmer. Further to the east, Jai Chand, the Raja of Kanauj, was at odds with Prithvi because Jai Chand's daughter had married Prithvi against her father's wishes. This violated the Rajput code of honor and Jai Chand had vowed to get even with his son-in-law. Rival princes held Benares, Ujjain, Bundelkhand, Bengal, Malwa and Gujrat. The Rashtrakutas were in power in central India. The Chola, Pandya and Chera kingdoms prospered in southern India.

The storms that become manifest as critical moments in history are first played out in the minds of men and women. It is in the minds-and hearts and souls-of humans that lust and passion, love and hatred, power and prejudice, greed and benevolence are first sorted out. When these conflicts are projected on the world plane, facts are created and the canvas of history rolls forward offering new possibilities for human action. Thus it was that the rivalry between Prithvi Raj and Jai Chand, born out of a love affair between Prithvi Raj and Jai Chand's daughter, played a critical role in the conquest of Delhi by the Afghans.

For three hundred years after the conquest of Sindh, Mansura and Multan by Muhammed bin Qasim (711), the frontier between the Caliphate in Baghdad and the Rajput strongholds in India remained more or less stationary. Mahmud's raids (1000-1026) shattered this equilibrium and showed up the weakness in the Indian defenses. The majestic but slow moving elephants in the Rajput armies were no match for the swift enveloping movements of the horsemen from Central Asia. After Mahmud, there were no major incursions into the subcontinent from the northwest and the Rajputs were able to reconsolidate their hold on the territories of central Punjab.

The status quo was changed by the Ghoris, a resilient tribe of Afghan-Turkomans who had challenged the Ghaznavids from the mountains of Ghor, located between Kabul and Herat. In 1173, Giasuddin Ghoris established himself as an independent ruler in Ghor and after capturing Ghazna itself, appointed his brother Moeezuddin Muhammed Ghoris as his lieutenant in the eastern provinces. Tough, resilient, resourceful and endowed in abundance with leadership qualities, Muhammed Ghoris cast his eyes east towards Hindustan. India was too rich a prize for any enterprising prince to disregard. But first he had to deal with the emirs and the Muslim princes of Afghanistan and the Punjab. By 1177, he had added Multan, Uch, Dera Ismail Khan and portions of Sindh to the Ghorid dominions. In 1178 he led a raid on Patan in Gujrat but suffered a setback. Turning his attention northwards, he captured Peshawar (1179), Sialkot (1185) and Lahore (1186). Initial forays eastward towards Delhi were not fruitful and on more than one occasion Muhammed Ghoris was cornered by the Rajputs but escaped after paying a ransom. However, an opportunity presented itself in 1190 when he successfully attacked and took the fort of Bhatinda. This skirmish led to a series of military actions with fateful consequences for the subcontinent.

The Raja of Bhatinda was an ally of Prithvi Raj Chauhan of Delhi. Treaty obligations compelled Prithvi to advance from Delhi to meet the Afghans. Muhammed Ghoris was returning to Kabul when news reached him of the Rajput advance. He turned around to defend Bhatinda, even though some of his cavalry had already preceded him to Kabul. The two armies met at Tarain in 1191. Ghoris fought bravely but the charge of the Indian elephants broke through the Afghan defenses. Ghoris was injured and barely escaped with his life. Undaunted, Ghoris regrouped in Kabul and returned the following year. This time Prithvi was supported by a large number of Rajput princes. However, Jai Chand, Raja of Kanauj, who had vowed to avenge his daughter's honor, supported Muhammed Ghoris. The armies met at the Second Battle of Tarain fought in 1192. The Indian forces charged, spearheaded by the elephant corps, but this time the Afghans feigned a retreat. Then, turning around in a rapid enveloping movement, trapped the Indian center. The Rajputs dispersed. Prithvi Raj was taken prisoner and later died in captivity.

The victory at Tarain made Muhammed Ghoris the master of Hindustan. After capturing Delhi, Ajmer and surrounding territories, he nominated his Mamluke lieutenant Qutbuddin Aibak as his deputy and returned to Ghazna. Meanwhile, his generals fanned out across the Gangetic plains and in swift movements reminiscent of the advance of Tariq and Musa in Spain five hundred years earlier, captured Bihar (1199) and Bengal (1202). Jai Chand, Raja of Kanauj, who had hitherto supported Muhammed Ghoris, was upset with the Muslim advance beyond his territories. He resisted but was defeated in a pitched battle in 1193. By 1205, all of the Indo-Gangetic plains were under Ghurid control.

Giasuddin Ghoris died in 1202 and Muhammed Ghoris ascended the throne of Ghazna. Much of the time of the new Sultan was occupied with containing the Turkish invasions from the north. In 1205, he suffered a defeat at the hands of the Kara Khitai Turkish tribe. Rumor spread that Muhammed Ghoris was killed in this battle. Sensing an opportunity, the Khokars of the Punjab revolted under the leadership of a local raja. The uprising was so well organized that Punjab was cut off from both Ghazna and Delhi. The revolt was crushed only when a pincer movement was organized wherein Muhammed

Ghori descended from the north while Qutbuddin Aibak advanced from Delhi to the south. While returning to Kabul after this successful engagement, Ghori was assassinated by a Fatimid assassin in 1206.

With the conquest of Delhi, the center of gravity of the Islamic world began to shift to the east, a process accelerated by the Mongol invasions (1219-1261) and the resulting destruction of Central Asia and Persia. It paved the way for successive Muslim dynasties in India and Pakistan, culminating with the magnificent Moghuls (1526-1707). The people of Hindustan entered the fold of a global Islamic community taking their place alongside the Arabs, Persians, Turks and Africans. In time, this would be augmented with the great Islamic communities of Indonesia and Malaysia. Islam took root in the subcontinent, giving birth to a flourishing and unique Indian Muslim civilization in a Hindu matrix. Lahore, Delhi, Agra, Lucknow and Hyderabad flourished as centers of Islamic learning, art and culture, rivaling and surpassing Samarqand, Damascus and Kairouan. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it paved the way for the birth of the modern nations of India, Pakistan and Bangladesh.

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