

History of Islam

An encyclopedia of Islamic history

Mahmud of Ghazna

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History is infinitely elastic. The actions of one person in any age cause ripples that affect the lives of thousands who live downstream. Mahmud of Ghazna is important in Islamic history because his actions set the tone for the interaction between the world of Islam and the world of the Hindus. The tone of that interaction created a bitterness that has been exploited by extremists in the Hindu-Muslim dialectic. No student of the history of India and Pakistan can overlook that fateful year of 1025 when Sultan Mahmud raided the Temple of Somanath in India and hauled away its vast treasures. Conversely, contemporary historians, who have looked at the subcontinent in isolation and have overlooked the global currents within which Mahmud operated, have misunderstood his actions and have unfairly accused him of being an “idol breaker”.

By any historic standard, Mahmud was a towering figure. If one had lived around the year 1000, one would have indeed looked upon him as the giant figure of the era. From Lahore to Baghdad, from the Caspian Sea to the Persian Gulf, the flag of Mahmud fluttered unchallenged. Mahmud was the son of Subaktagin, who in turn was the son in law of Alaptagin. Alaptagin, a Mamluke (slave) soldier from a Turkish tribe, served in the Samanid court in Bukhara. As the Samanid dynasty waned and lost its power, Alaptagin moved to the mountains of Afghanistan and established his authority in Ghazna. The Samanids tried to subdue Alaptagin but were unsuccessful. Alaptagin died in 995 and his son-in-law Subaktagin succeeded him. Subaktagin turned his attention to the east, crossed the Indus River and added western Punjab to his dominions. Acknowledging his military successes, the Abbasid Caliph Qadir Billah of Baghdad conferred on Subaktagin the title of *Nasir ud Dawla* (Defender of the Realm). Legitimacy of rule in Sunni Islam flowed from the Caliph who bestowed his favors on ambitious princes and soldiers through a whole range of titles. Subaktagin was an outstanding soldier and he consolidated his hold on Afghanistan, the Frontier areas and western Punjab.

When Subaktagin died in 997, his sons Mahmud and Ismail contested for power. Mahmud, by far the more gifted of the two, was victorious. When Samanid power disappeared in the year 999, Mahmud moved quickly to annex Khorasan. Persian power disappeared from Central Asia and was replaced by Turkoman power, although Persian influence in the region continued to flourish through the Farsi language. The Caliph in Baghdad recognized Mahmud's legitimacy by conferring upon him the titles of *Yamin ud Dawla* (The Right Hand of the Realm) and *Amin ul Millat* (Trustee of the Believers).

Mahmud now turned his attention to India. It is in his interactions with Hindustan that the historic importance of Mahmud crystallizes. To understand Mahmud's raids into India one must revisit the global situation of the Muslims at the time. The Islamic world was divided between the Fatimids in Cairo and the Abbasids in Baghdad, with the Umayyads in Spain claiming their own Caliphate based in Cordoba. The Fatimids controlled North Africa, Egypt, Syria and Arabia. Fatimid sympathizers ruled from Multan (in modern Pakistan) and for a while also from Bukhara. The Fatimids had, in effect, bottled up the Abbasids. The impact of this isolation was profoundly felt in the patterns of trade in West Asia. The Fatimids were successful in diverting the lucrative trade with India and the Far East from the Persian Gulf to the Red Sea and from there through Egypt to southern Europe. In addition, the profitable trade in gold and nuts with sub-Saharan Africa also flowed through Fatimid territories.

With no outlet to the Mediterranean from its dominions, Baghdad waned while Cairo prospered. Venetian merchants record the prosperity of Cairo of that period. In addition to this financial squeeze, the Caliphs in Baghdad came under increasing military pressure from surrounding areas. The (Ithna Ashari) Buyids controlled the territories surrounding Baghdad for fifty years. Thus the century between 969 (when the Fatimids conquered Egypt) and 1056 (when the Fatimids were driven out of Baghdad) marks the lowest point for the Sunnis in the internal struggles among Muslims. The financial condition of the Abbasid Caliphs was so bad that they had to auction off their immense treasures to raise cash. Ibn Kathir records at least one such auction, circa 1050.

The Seljuks militarily rescued the Abbasids. The fact that much of the population of North Africa and Asia remained Sunni through centuries of Fatimid control helped the Turks in this endeavor. To finance their campaigns, the Turkoman rulers of Central Asia increasingly turned their attention to India. Through the ages, India has been a great sink for the world's gold. Indian spices, ivory and manufactured goods were in great demand in the Mediterranean world and beyond. This was paid for in gold, which flowed from the mines in West Africa through the Arabian Sea to the Indian subcontinent. The balance of trade was always in favor of the Indians because spices are grown every year while the supply of gold is limited. India accumulated vast reserves of gold that was sunk into private jewelry and into the temples of the vast subcontinent. Time and again, this accumulated wealth attracted the attention of invaders who raided the subcontinent in search of loot to pay for their military campaigns.

For political centralization to succeed, three conditions must be satisfied. First, there must be a binding force, a cement that holds a people together. This could be a transcendental idea or belief system, or it could be primal cohesiveness based on tribe, nation or race. Second, the power of military offense must have preponderance over the ability to defend. Third, there must be money to finance the process of centralization.

Around the year 1000, two different visions of Islam, that of the Abbasids in Baghdad and that of the Fatimids in Cairo, were competing for primacy. Although the Fatimids held the upper hand militarily for almost a century, neither side had the offensive power to completely overwhelm the other. Both sides needed money to finance their mutually hostile campaigns. The Fatimids raided the coastal cities of Muslim Spain and Roman Catholic Italy in pursuit of gold. The sultans who supported the Abbasids not only needed cash to finance their operations against the Fatimids, but also to stem the constant military pressure from the Turkish tribes across the Oxus River. For their cash, they turned east.

Sultan Mahmud's raids into India must be understood in this context. Religion, or even dynastic ambitions, had little to do with these raids. The driving force was the need for gold, required to finance the *realpolitik* of the times. Mahmud raided India 17 times between 1000 and 1030. Peshawar (1001), Bhera (1004), Nagarkot (1007), Thaneshwar (1014), Tarain (1018) and Kanauj (1018) fell to him one after

the other. The most famous of his raids carried him deep into Indian territories. In 1025, it took him to Somanath, the site of a major Shiva temple. The Indians put up a stiff resistance but lost. Mahmud's armies carried away the treasures of the temple.

Some historians have used this episode to call Mahmud an idol breaker, or worse yet, a symbol of intolerant Islam towards other religions. The historical facts do not substantiate this charge. Mahmud's raids must be examined in the context of the political situation in western India. The area was politically fossilized, with several rajas from the Chudasama, Abhihara, Paramara, Chalukya and Yadava dynasties competing for territory. Jain and Hindu temples dominated the religious landscape. Some of these, such as the Shiva temple at Somanath were well endowed. The area was rich due to its trade with West Asia. Local rajas often raided the temples in each other's territory, or way laid the pilgrims on their way to the temples, in search of loot.

Mahmud was not the first one to raid the Indian temples nor did his raids have anything to do with Islam or even his own dynastic ambitions. This is borne out by the fact that he did not stay in India or extend his sultanate to the territories in Gujrat. The raids were purely economic. Romila Thapur, in a research article, *Somanatha, Narratives of a History* (Islamic Voice, Bangalore, India, October 1999), records several raids of local rajas on each other's temples. The coloring of Mahmud's raids in religious tones was the work of British historians in the 19th century. Specifically, it was the British politicians who rewrote Indian history. In 1843, during a debate in the House of Commons on a proposed invasion of Afghanistan by the British, Lord Ellenborough referred to Mahmud's raids having caused "Hindu trauma". The British, during their invasion, briefly occupied Ghazna, tore off the doorway to Mahmud's tomb claiming it was taken from Somanath and brought it back to Delhi. It was discovered later that the doorway was of Mamluke Egyptian design and had nothing to do with India.

Mahmud consolidated his hold on the Punjab and established Lahore as its capital (1020). In 1004, he defeated and replaced Daud, the Fatimid ruler of Multan. Upon his capital of Ghazna, he bestowed untold riches. He established universities, patronized scholars, built hospitals and instituted a fair and equitable administration. Substantial presents were also sent to Baghdad to obtain from the Caliph the title of Sultan, but this effort was unsuccessful. Mahmud was a patron of Farsi literature and the great poet Firdowsi graced his court. One of the most celebrated scholars of the times, Al Baruni, accompanied Mahmud in his last campaign to India. It is to this scholar that we owe our knowledge of the peoples of medieval India, their philosophy, beliefs, customs, culture and traditions. Al Baruni wrote *Kitab ul Hind*, a masterpiece unsurpassed in its unbiased appraisal of Hindu culture, science, mathematics and technology of the time. Al Masudi also translated works from Sanskrit and Greek. His other works include *Qanun e Masudi and Chronology of Ancient Nations*.

Mahmud's preoccupation with the Indian campaigns weakened the defenses to the north against Turkish incursions. Around the year 1000, one of these tribes, the Oghuz, crossed the Oxus River. Mahmud, cognizant of the potential threat from this quarter, had the Oghuz dispersed in Khorasan with the hope that such dispersal would weaken their cohesiveness. He was incorrect in his assessment. One of the Oghuz tribes soon consolidated its power under their chief Seljuk and within forty years wrested Khorasan and Afghanistan from the successors of Mahmud. They went on to found a dynasty whose influence proved to be pivotal in world history. This was the beginning of the Seljuk dynasty.

Mahmud's exploits disrupted the Indian defenses, exposed their weakness and opened the door to subsequent penetrations from the northwest. Mahmud was a brilliant soldier but he lacked the statesmanship to build an Indian empire or establish a relationship of trust with the people of

Hindustan. This task had to wait another two hundred years until the arrival of Qutbuddin Aibak and the Mamlukes.

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