History Cross-Search

Delhi Sultanate

The Delhi Sultanate is the collective name given to the first rulers and dynasties to conquer and establish direct Muslim rule in northern India. They made Delhi, or the cluster of fortress cities that succeeded each other and eventually became Delhi, their capital. The rulers were Turks and Afghans who formed an elite class that emulated the cultural and political traditions of the Persians. As Muslim sovereigns, however, they derived their legitimacy from the Abbasid caliph in Baghdad, who recognized Iltutmish (r. 1211–36), the Turkish Mamluk commander in India, as the sultan for that region in 1229. Muslim rulers in India thereafter kept the title, which identified its holders as powerful sovereigns who served as defenders of the caliphate.

The five main phases of the Delhi Sultanate were

- Mamluk dynasty 1211–1290
- Khalji dynasty 1290–1320
- Tughluqi dynasty 1320–1413
- Sayyid dynasty 1413–1451
- Lodi dynasty 1451–1526

The Delhi Sultans conquered much of northern India, including west Bengal and the Deccan region of central India. With the passage of time, despite persistent and spirited resistance from Hindu Rajput kings, the ranks of the Muslim ruling elite grew by intermarriages and alliances with Hindus and the recruitment of Hindu converts and Indian-born Muslims. Hindu states in southern India paid tribute to the Delhi Sultans when they were strong enough to exercise influence southward. The Delhi Sultanate suffered a terrible reversal when the Mongol conqueror Timur (Tamerlane, d. 1405) invaded India and sacked Delhi in 1398–99. He did not stay long, but he left behind a shattered sultanate. In 1526, Timur's great grandson, Babur, returned to found the Mughal dynasty and absorb the remnants of the Delhi Sultanate.

It is not an accident that the Delhi Sultanate first arose at the same time that the Mongols were invading the Middle East from their bases in Central Asia. Indeed, the building of Delhi's fortifications was done in large part to defend against Mongol invaders from the northwest. These defensive efforts were successful, so that as Muslim cities in Persia were being razed to the ground, Muslim refugees, including religious scholars and mystics, were able to find a new home in India.

The Delhi sultans built mosques and religious schools and employed Hanafi judges and legal scholars to serve in them. The 13th century was also when the Chishti, Suhrawardi, and Kubrawi Sufi orders established their centers in India. On the other hand, the Delhi sultans, who were Sunnis, attempted to eradicate Ismaili Shia rulers and communities that had earlier settled in northwestern areas of India. Also, in their wars of expansion, they plundered and desecrated Hindu temples, as previous dynasties had done from bases in Afghanistan. This appears to have been a method of enhancing state revenues and undermining the legitimacy of rival Hindu monarchs rather than an outright assault against the Hindu religion. Once the Delhi sultans consolidated their hold on territories in India, they generally took a more pragmatic approach toward their Hindu subjects, who far outnumbered them. Many Hindu temples and religious sites were left alone; Muslim rulers endorsed protecting them and even allowed demolished temples to be repaired and new ones to be built. This policy continued to be observed by the Mughals.

Further Information

