

### A NOTE ON HISTORY'S DARKER PERIODS

History sometimes seems to be full of wars and destruction; it is true that it rarely focuses on periods when the society is, on the whole, harmonious and peaceful. But while every country may have had such peaceful eras and some benevolent rulers, history seems peopled by incompetent, corrupt or cruel rulers. We find them especially in what we may call the darker chapters or periods of history, when war, abuse, fanaticism, bloodshed, etc., suddenly dominate the landscape and inflict suffering and misery on the whole society or country.

The world over, historians have faced this dilemma: how much attention should we draw to such darker periods? Should we omit them entirely? Should we mention them in passing, with most atrocious details left out? Or should we face them and analyse them so as to understand what made such developments possible and, hopefully, help avoid their recurrence in future? The third option is, in our opinion, the best, if it can be done with enough detachment and sensitivity; it is important to know our past, pleasant or unpleasant, since the past continues to live with us and shapes the present.

What do we mean by 'detachment and sensitivity'? Simply that it is important to study those darker developments dispassionately, without blaming anyone living today for them. For instance, you will learn later that World War II (1939–1945) resulted in millions of deaths worldwide; Germany then followed a cruel ideology (known as 'Nazism') which believed in the extermination of 'inferior races' and resulted in the inhuman treatment of some ethnic groups and a brutal rule of occupied nations. Yet it would be clearly unacceptable to blame today's Germans for what happened over eight decades ago. Rather, what matters is to understand what made the Nazi ideology possible, so that similar ideologies today or tomorrow may be defeated.

The same principle applies to the 'Tapestry of the Past' chapters in this textbook, which include passages on warfare and instances of cruelty or brutality. While those happenings cannot be erased or denied, it would be wrong to hold anyone today responsible for them. Understanding the historical origin of cruel violence, abusive misrule or misplaced ambitions of power is the best way to heal the past and build a future where, hopefully, they will have no place.

## Questions and activities

1. Compare the political strategies of the Delhi Sultanate and the Mughals. What similarities and differences existed between them?
2. Why did kingdoms like the Vijayanagara Empire and the Ahom Kingdom manage to resist conquest for a longer time compared to others? What geographical, military, and social factors contributed to their success?
3. Imagine you are a scholar in the court of Akbar or Krishnadevaraya. Write a letter to a friend describing the politics, trade, culture, and society you are witnessing.
4. How come Akbar, a ruthless conqueror in his young days, grew tolerant and benevolent after some years? What could have led to such a change?
5. What might have happened if the Vijayanagara Empire had won the Battle of Talikota? Imagine and describe how it could have changed the political and cultural history of south India.
6. Many values promoted by early Sikhism, including equality, *seva*, and justice, remain relevant today. Select one of these values and discuss how it remains relevant in contemporary society.
7. Imagine you are a trader in a port city (Surat, Calicut or Hooghly). Describe the scenes you see as regards goods, people you trade with, movement of ships, etc.

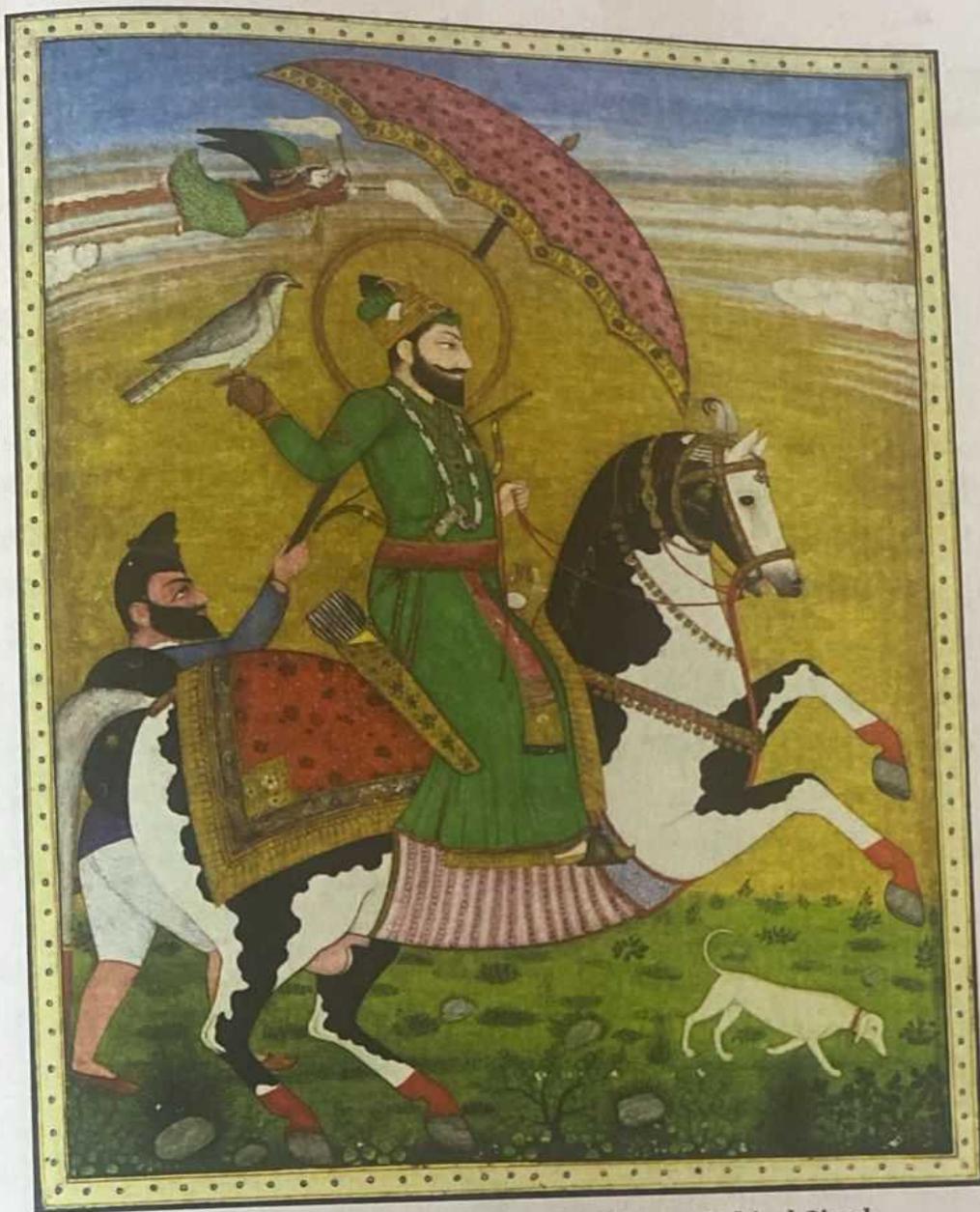


Fig. 2.26. Miniature painting of Guru Gobind Singh



## DON'T MISS OUT

Do you know what the Gurudwara Sis Gunj Sahib in Chandni Chowk — the famous shopping area in Delhi — signifies? In Sikhism, a gurudwara is a place of worship. This one marks the site where Guru Tegh Bahadur, the ninth Sikh Guru, was beheaded by Aurangzeb in 1675. This historic Gurdwara is uniquely honoured by the Sikh Regiment, which has saluted it before the President in the Republic Day parade each year since 1979. It stands as a powerful symbol of faith and sacrifice in Indian history.

## LET'S EXPLORE

In his last letters to two of his sons, Aurangzeb wrote, "I came alone and am going away alone. I know not who I am and what I have been doing. ... I have not done well for the country and the people, and of the future there is no hope. I was helpless [in life] and I am departing helpless." What do these words tell us about Aurangzeb? How do you feel about them?



## THINK ABOUT IT

Some of the invaders and rulers mentioned above committed terrible deeds and atrocities. Many more could have been mentioned. As the 'Note on History's Darker Chapters' on page 20 makes clear, we must keep in mind that this is about people in the past, not people of today. We need to know the facts of the past, and the victims of these atrocities deserve our respect and remembrance. But it is important to keep in mind that we, today, bear no responsibility for actions of individuals hundreds of years ago.

## RESISTANCE TO THE MUGHALS

Let us survey some of the major rebellions that ended up eroding the Mughal power (keeping the special case of the Marathas for the next chapter).

Over the centuries, many peasant communities rebelled against harsh exploitation. One such case, in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, involves the **Jat peasantry** (in present-day western Uttar Pradesh, Haryana and eastern Rajasthan), who managed to kill an oppressive officer of the Mughal administration. In a subsequent battle, 20,000 men confronted the Mughal army and fought valiantly, but their Jat leader was killed and the rebellion suppressed.

Many tribal groups — the **Bhils**, the **Gonds**, the **Santhals**, the **Kochs**, for instance — also fought back against attempts to annex their territory or impose taxes on them. While some of these groups were subdued or gradually integrated into the

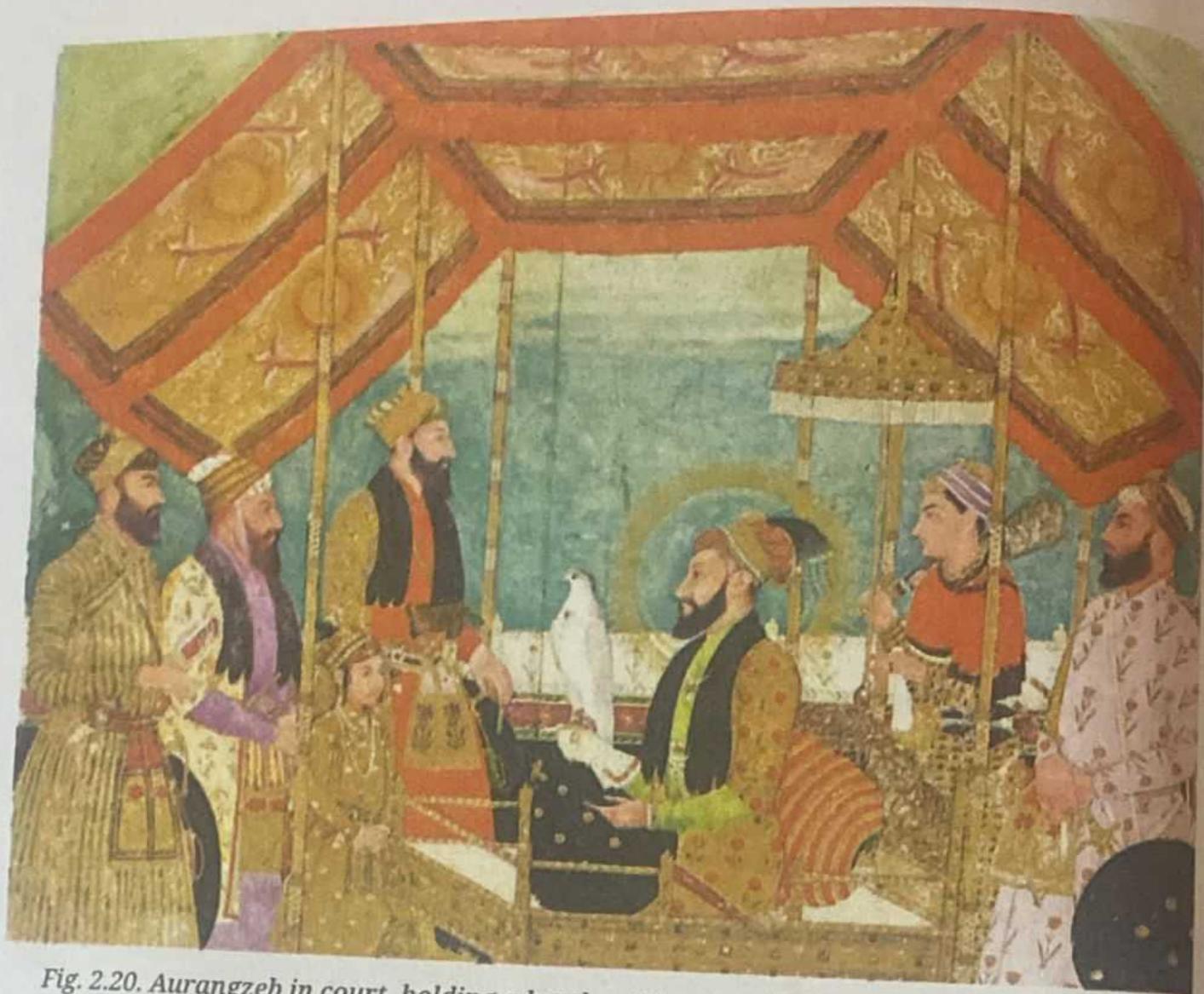


Fig. 2.20. Aurangzeb in court, holding a hawk, with one of his sons standing in front of him (17<sup>th</sup>-century painting).

Some scholars argue that Aurangzeb's motives were primarily political, that is, to establish and strengthen his empire's dominance; they also give examples of grants and assurances of protection he gave to some temples. While politics did play a part in his decisions, Aurangzeb's own farmans (or firmans, i.e., edicts) make his personal religious motive clear too. In 1669, for instance, he ordered governors of all provinces "to demolish schools and temples of the infidels and put down their teachings and religious practices." Temples at Banaras (present-day Varanasi), Mathura, Somnath, among many others, were destroyed, as well as Jain temples and Sikh gurudwaras. This aspect of Aurangzeb was also visible in his persecution of Muslims of other sects, including Sufis, and of Zoroastrians (the religion of Parsis in India, originally from Persia).

**Aurangzeb** defeated him in a series of battles and eventually executed him, presenting his severed head to their father. Aurangzeb also removed his two other brothers — he had one arrested and executed, and drove the second into exile. To prevent further challenge to his rule, Aurangzeb imprisoned his father Shah Jahan in the Agra Fort, where he remained until his death. Aurangzeb crowned himself emperor in 1658 and named himself 'Alamgir' or 'conqueror of the world'; he ruled for almost 49 years.



### THINK ABOUT IT

We saw above that Delhi sultans' average reign lasted about nine years. This figure becomes 27 years in the case of Mughal emperors up to Aurangzeb; and 16 years if we consider all Mughal rulers, up to the end of the empire in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. What do you make of these numbers of years of reign?

Aurangzeb, skilled in military matters, conducted many campaigns, conquering parts of the South in particular. Under his reign the Mughal empire reached its greatest expansion (see Fig. 2.16), though constantly faced with significant rebellions, some of which we will turn to in the next section. Aurangzeb had to spend the last 25 years of his life fighting war after war in the Deccan. Maintaining large armies for those campaigns depleted the empire's treasury and put a great strain on the administration; indeed, this is often considered one of key factors in the rapid decline of Mughal power after Aurangzeb's death in 1707.

Aurangzeb, who belonged to Islam's Sunni sect, was deeply religious; he led an austere life, and, unlike Akbar, observed all religious rituals and occasions. He gradually banned practices he regarded as un-Islamic, such as music and dance in his court, and reimposed the *jizya* tax on non-Muslims as well as a pilgrimage tax on Hindus travelling to their sacred places (both of which had been abolished by Akbar).

as the builder of the Taj Mahal at Agra. The Taj Mahal is even today recognized as one of the great architectural marvels of the world. This period formed the peak of an immense flowering of art and architecture, which included the building of Humayun's tomb in Delhi and the Red Forts in Delhi and Agra. Other classical arts and music of India also flourished during this period, as also remarkable works of calligraphy and miniature painting.



Fig. 2.19. A miniature painting illustrating the Persian translation of the Rāmāyana and depicting the well-known episode of Rāma chasing the golden deer.

### Aurangzeb

We mentioned earlier the frequent violent successions during the Sultanate period; this was repeated during the succession of Shah Jahan, who fell ill in 1657. He wished the throne to go to **Dara Shikoh**, his eldest son, but Dara's younger brother



As I grew in knowledge, I was overwhelmed with shame. Not being a Muslim myself, it was unmeet [i.e., inappropriate] to force others to become such. What constancy is to be expected from proselytes [i.e., converted people] on compulsion?"

His long reign lasted almost 50 years (1556 to his death in 1605); while its middle period was relatively peaceful, the final 15 years involved fresh military campaigns in Kashmir, Sindh, the Deccan, and Afghanistan.

Fig. 2.17. Painting showing Akbar in his court receiving scholars, including two Jesuits (dressed in black).



### THINK ABOUT IT

Why do you think Akbar employed different strategies to expand his empire, while the earlier rulers of Delhi relied mostly on military might?

## Akbar

Declared emperor at the age of 13 upon his father Humayun's accidental death, Akbar set out to bring the entire Subcontinent under Mughal control; his reign was a blend of brutality and tolerance, shaped by ambition and strategy.

In early conquests, following many of his predecessors' examples, he showed no mercy at the fort Chittor (or Chittorgarh, in Rajasthan), which he besieged for more than five months in the face of determined resistance from the Rajput soldiers. They inflicted heavy losses on the Mughal army, but, the fort finally breached, died fighting in large numbers, while hundreds of women committed *jauhar* (see box). Akbar ordered the massacre of some 30,000 civilians, and the surviving women and children were enslaved. Akbar was 25 at the time, and he sent a message of victory which read, "We have succeeded in occupying a number of forts and towns belonging to the infidels and have established Islam there. With the help of our bloodthirsty sword, we have erased the signs of infidelity from their minds and have destroyed temples in those places and also all over Hindustan."

### What is *jauhar*?

When invading Turkic or Mughal armies conquered a territory, they often took the women as slaves or abused them. There are historical examples of Rajput women jumping into mass fires to avoid being captured and enslaved; this *jauhar* was considered a heroic act of final resistance and a means of preserving one's honour. Thus, when Akbar finally broke into the Chittorgarh Fort, hundreds of Rajput women, led by their queens and noblewomen, committed *jauhar*.

Akbar followed his predecessors in this thought of his: "A monarch should be ever intent on conquest, otherwise his enemies rise in arms against him." As his empire grew (Fig. 2.16), he increasingly used political strategies to stabilise it; he entered into marriage alliances with princesses of neighbouring kingdoms, welcomed Rajput and regional leaders into his court, abolished the *jizya*, and promoted the doctrine of *sulh-i-kul* — literally, 'peace with all' or tolerance of all faiths. Through interfaith dialogues, appointment

## Babur and India

Babur left a candid autobiography of great historical value, *Baburnama* ('Babur's Memoirs'). In it, he comes out as cultured and intellectually curious, with a keen appreciation for architecture, poetry, animals (birds especially). But he was also a brutal and ruthless conqueror, slaughtering entire populations of cities, enslaving women and children, and taking pride in erecting 'towers of skulls' made from the slaughtered people of plundered cities.

Babur was nostalgic about Central Asia and found India to be a 'country of few charms'; at the same time, he acknowledged, "Hindustan is a large country and has masses of gold and silver. ... Through the rainy season, the air is remarkably fine, not to be surpassed for healthiness and charm. ... There are countless artisans and workmen of every sort in Hindustan." Perhaps for the last reasons, especially India's wealth, he decided to stay and build his empire in India rather than return to Central Asia.



### THINK ABOUT IT

What strikes you in Babur's impressions of India? Discuss in groups.

After Babur's death in 1530, his son **Humayun** struggled to hold the empire together. Taking advantage of this, Sher Shah Suri, a powerful Afghan leader, established the Sur Empire over large parts of north India and introduced many lasting reforms; the empire was short-lived, however, as Humayun soon reconquered the lost ground.

Before this happened, **Himu** (or Hemu), a skilled military commander and chief minister ('wazir') under one of the last Suri rulers, captured Delhi and ruled it briefly under the royal name of Hemchandra Vikramaditya. Though enjoying some military successes, he was injured on the battlefield (the Second Battle of Panipat) when confronted by Babur's grandson, **Akbar**. Captured, Himu was brought to Akbar, who had him beheaded. Akbar soon reclaimed Delhi for the Mughals.

**Iconoclasm:**  
The rejection or destruction of icons or religious images considered idolatrous.

provided free labour or were sent away to distant Central Asia to be sold). But plunder, in turn, affected trade networks and agricultural production. This period also witnessed numerous attacks on sacred or revered images in Buddhist, Jain and Hindu temples; such destruction was motivated not just by plunder but also by **iconoclasm**.



### THINK ABOUT IT

Why do we use the term 'image' rather than common terms like 'idol' or 'icon'? The latter two terms are considered pejorative in the context of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, whose orthodox sects condemn 'idolatry' or the worship of 'idols' or 'icons'.

India's classical texts used words like *mūrti*, *vigraha*, *pratimā*, *rūpa*, etc., to designate images, often statues, used for worship in temples or homes. In English, 'image' is a neutral term.

**Infidel:**  
Literally, someone who does not share the faith (of a given religion). For medieval Christianity, infidels were Muslims or Pagans; for medieval Islam, infidels were Christians or, in the context of India, Hindus, Buddhists or Jains.

Some of the sultans also imposed the *jizya*, a tax on non-Muslim subjects to grant them protection and exemption from military service. In practice, depending on the ruler, this discriminatory tax would be a source of economic burden and public humiliation, and formed a financial and social incentive for subjects to convert to Islam. At the end of the 14<sup>th</sup> century, Timur, a brutal Turkic-Mongol conqueror from central Asia, invaded northwest India and launched a devastating attack on Delhi, then a thriving city. As he wrote in his memoirs, his two-fold objective was to wage "war with the **infidels** and to gain something by plundering the wealth of the infidels." Large numbers were killed or enslaved, and the city was left in ruins. Timur soon withdrew from India with huge plunder, leaving chaos behind. In the aftermath, the Lodis emerged and established the last dynasty of the Delhi Sultanate. By then, however, its territory had shrunk considerably in the face of increasing resistance from other states and kingdoms from within India (see Fig. 2.3).

the Subcontinent was now under one ruler. Although this dominance was significant, it proved to be short-lived. Muhammad bin Tughlaq had ambitious schemes, but they were often poorly executed. One such was moving his capital from Delhi to Daulatabad (then called 'Devagiri', near present-day Sambhaji Nagar); perhaps he thought its more central location would offer better control of the empire. The people were forced to travel over 1,000 km, and a few years later, as his plan misfired, he shifted the capital back to Delhi; both transfers resulted in great loss of life according to some sources. Another instance was the introduction of 'token currency', where cheap copper coins were

declared to be tokens and have the value of silver or gold coins — although this was a progressive idea (most of our currency today is actually 'token'), at the time this created confusion in the trade and encouraged people to counterfeit copper coins, all of which caused the economy to decline.

The sultans and their court elite lived in luxurious palaces, enjoying elaborate clothing, jewelled ornaments and fine food. This wealth was largely derived from plunder from their military campaigns, taxes levied on common people and conquered regions, and engagement in slave trade (as enslaved people

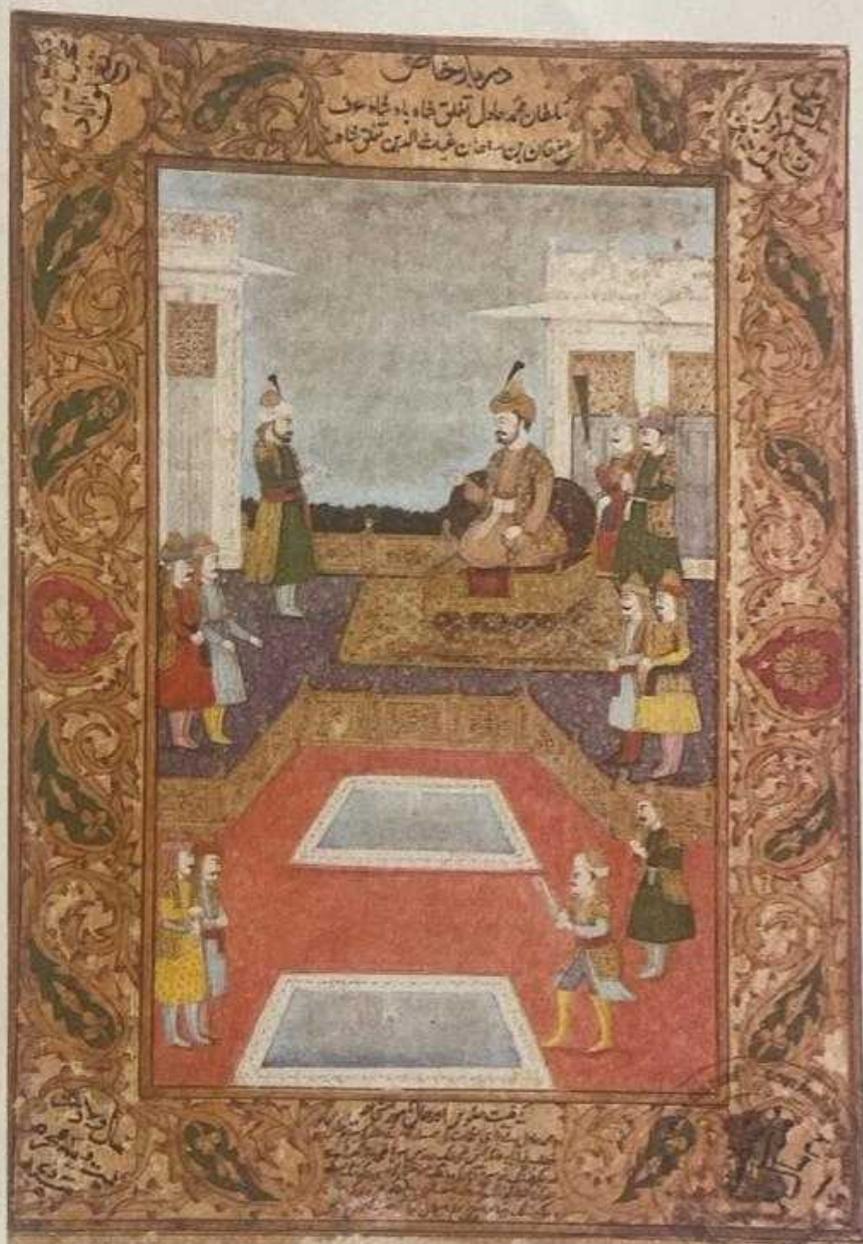


Fig. 2.7. A 19<sup>th</sup>-century painting depicting Muhammad bin Tughlaq in his court



Fig. 2.6. A coin minted by Ala-ud-din Khilji, which bears the inscription 'Sikander Sani' or 'the second Alexander' in Persian.

and destroyed temples and seats of learning. Successions (the appointments of new sultans) were often violent; almost two sultans out of three seized power by eliminating their predecessor, so that a sultan's average reign was hardly more than nine years!

### LET'S EXPLORE

Looking at Fig. 2.6, why do you think Ala-ud-din Khilji called himself 'the second Alexander'?

At the turn of the 14<sup>th</sup> century, **Ala-ud-din Khilji** conducted military campaigns over large areas of north and central India, sacking and plundering many cities; at the same time, he also repelled several invasions by Mongol forces, who were trying to add India to the vast Mongol Empire (it covered most of Asia at the time).

His slave-general Malik Kafur expanded the Sultanate's reach southward, conquering several kingdoms on the way; their plundered wealth helped finance the Sultanate's enormous military apparatus. He also attacked a number of Hindu centres such as Srirangam, Madurai, Chidambaram, and possibly Rameswaram.

### LET US EXPLORE

What kind of resources do you think were needed to maintain an army and wage war in those days? Discuss in groups the various types of expenditure involved, from weapons or food for soldiers to animals used in warfare, road construction, etc.

A few decades later, **Muhammad bin Tughlaq** (or 'Tughluq') ruled Delhi and expanded the Delhi Sultanate's territories further. For the first time since the Mauryan Empire, most of

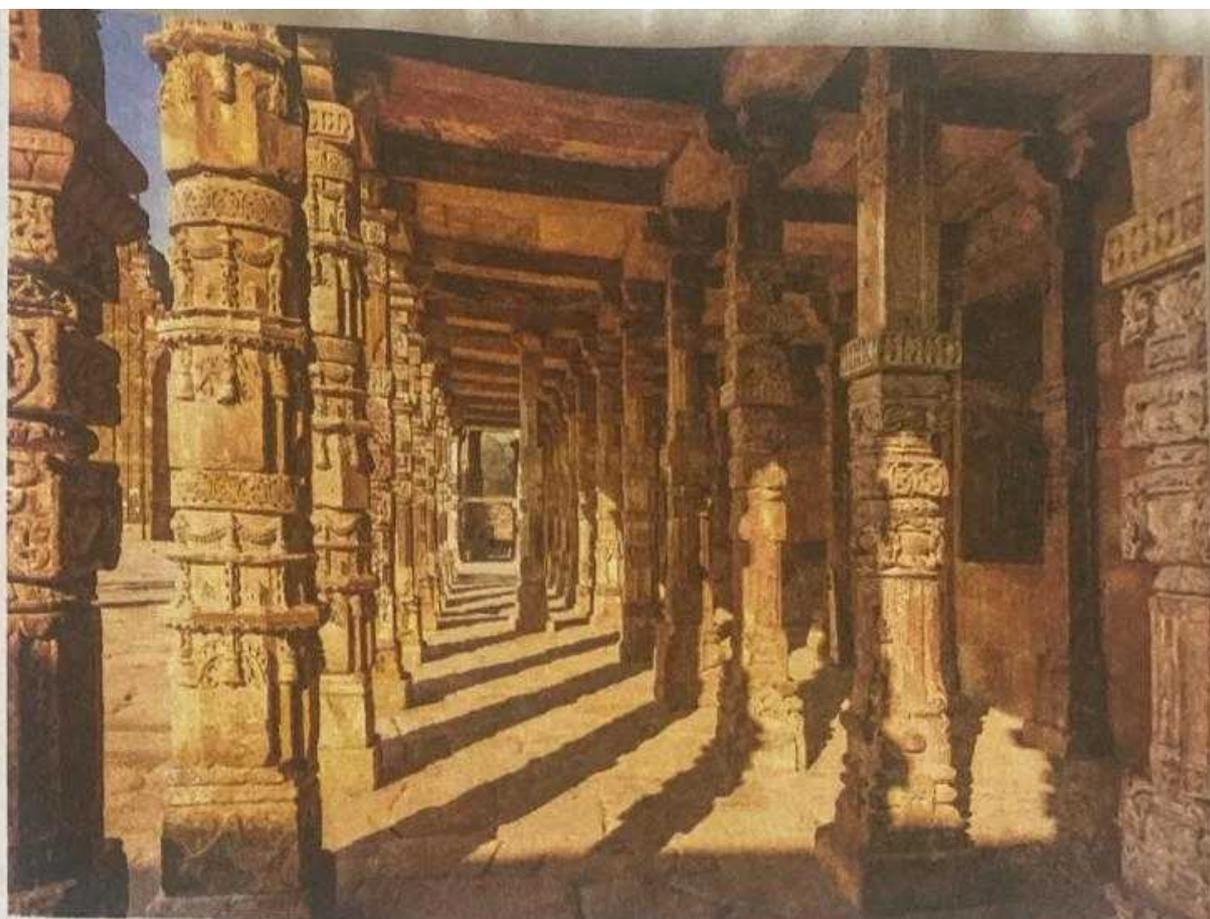


Fig. 2.4. The Qutub Minar. Fig. 2.5. A section of the Quwwat-ul-Islam ('Might of Islam') mosque in Delhi's Qutub Minar complex; its construction began in Qutub-ud-din Aibak's time (early 13<sup>th</sup> century) and was completed by later sultans. An inscription states that materials from 27 destroyed Hindu and Jain temples were used in the construction, some of which can be seen here.

## RISE AND FALL OF THE DELHI SULTANATE

We begin our journey here with the Delhi **Sultanate**, formed after the defeat in 1192 of King Prithviraj Chauhan, who ruled over parts of northwestern India. This Sultanate saw the rule of five successive foreign dynasties of Turkic-Afghan origin — the Mamluks (or 'Slave dynasty'), the Khiljis (or Khaljis), the Tughlaqs, the Sayyids, and the Lodis (or Lodhis). While certain parts of northern India came under the control of the Delhi Sultanate, neighbouring kingdoms, such as the Eastern Gangas in the east and the Hoysalas in the south resisted its advance (Fig. 2.3) and also emerged as thriving centres of art, culture, and administration. The city of Delhi also assumed a bigger role in the political landscape of northern India.

The Sultanate period was marked by political instability combined with efforts at territorial expansion. This resulted in military campaigns that raided villages and cities, and plundered

**Sultanate:**  
A territory ruled by a 'Sultan' — a title that some Muslim rulers adopted.