

# 3 THE DELHI SULTANS

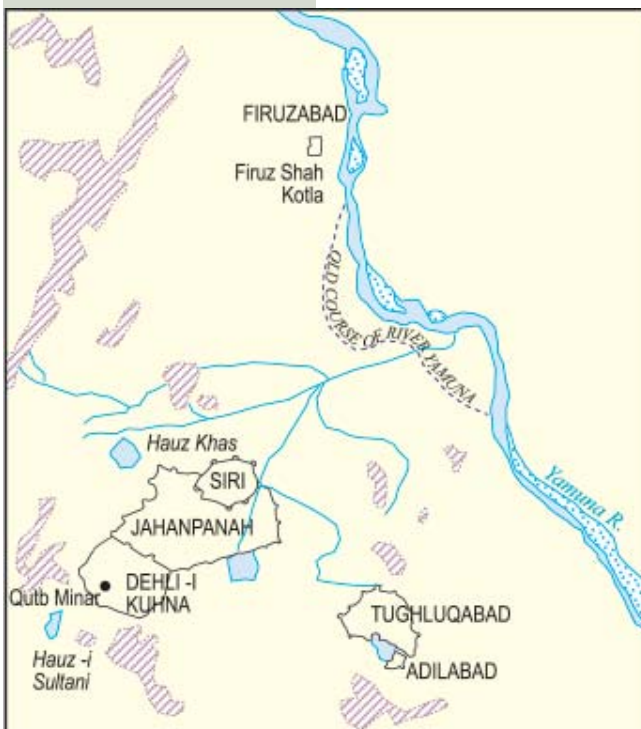
In Chapter 2 we saw that regions like the Kaveri delta became the centre of large kingdoms. Did you notice that there was no mention of a kingdom with Delhi as its capital? That was because Delhi became an important city only in the twelfth century.

Take a look at Table 1. Delhi first became the capital of a kingdom under the Tomara Rajputs, who were defeated in the middle of the twelfth century by the Chauhans (also referred to as Chahamanas) of Ajmer. It was under the Tomaras and Chauhans that Delhi became an important commercial centre. Many rich Jaina merchants lived in the city and constructed several temples. Coins minted here, called *dehliwal*, had a wide circulation.

The transformation of Delhi into a capital that controlled vast areas of the subcontinent started with the foundation of the Delhi Sultanate in the beginning of the thirteenth century. Take a look at Table 1 again and identify the five dynasties that together made the Delhi Sultanate.

The Delhi Sultans built many cities in the area that we now know as Delhi. Look at Map 1 and locate Dehli-i Kuhna, Siri and Jahanpanah.

**Map 1**  
Selected Sultanate cities of Delhi, thirteenth-fourteenth centuries.



# The rulers of Delhi

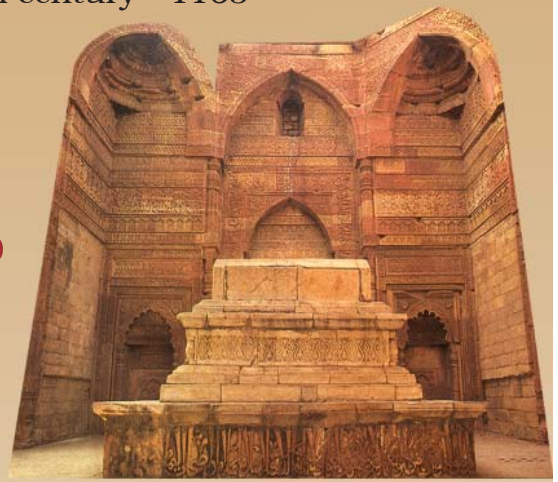
Table 1

## RAJPUT DYNASTIES

|                    |                              |
|--------------------|------------------------------|
| Tomaras            | early twelfth century - 1165 |
| Ananga Pala        | 1130 -1145                   |
| Chauhans           | 1165 -1192                   |
| Prithviraj Chauhan | 1175 -1192                   |

## EARLY TURKISH RULERS 1206-1290

|                      |            |
|----------------------|------------|
| Qutbuddin Aybak      | 1206 -1210 |
| Shamsuddin Iltutmish | 1210 -1236 |
| Raziyya              | 1236 -1240 |
| Ghiyasuddin Balban   | 1266 -1287 |



*Iltutmish's tomb*



*Alai Darwaza*

## KHALJI DYNASTY 1290 - 1320

|                   |             |
|-------------------|-------------|
| Jalaluddin Khalji | 1290 - 1296 |
| Alauddin Khalji   | 1296 -1316  |

## TUGHLUQ DYNASTY 1320 - 1414

|                     |            |
|---------------------|------------|
| Ghiyasuddin Tughluq | 1320 -1324 |
| Muhammad Tughluq    | 1324 -1351 |
| Firuz Shah Tughluq  | 1351 -1388 |

## SAYYID DYNASTY 1414 - 1451

|            |            |
|------------|------------|
| Khizr Khan | 1414 -1421 |
|------------|------------|

## LODI DYNASTY 1451 - 1526

|             |            |
|-------------|------------|
| Bahlul Lodi | 1451 -1489 |
|-------------|------------|



*Firuz Shah Tughluq's tomb*

## Finding out about the Delhi Sultans

Although inscriptions, coins and architecture provide a lot of information, especially valuable are “histories”, *tarikh* (singular) / *tawarikh* (plural), written in Persian, the language of administration under the Delhi Sultans.



Fig. 1

Four stages in the preparation of a manuscript.

1. Preparing the paper.
2. Writing the text.
3. Melting gold to highlight important words and passages.
4. Preparing the binding.

The authors of *tawarikh* were learned men: secretaries, administrators, poets and courtiers, who both recounted events and advised rulers on governance, emphasising the importance of just rule.

### The Circle of Justice

Fakhr-i Mudabbir wrote in the thirteenth century:

*A king cannot survive without soldiers. And soldiers cannot live without salaries. Salaries come from the revenue collected from peasants. But peasants can pay revenue only when they are prosperous and happy. This happens when the king promotes justice and honest governance.*



Do you think the circle of justice is an appropriate term to describe the relationship between the king and his subjects?

Keep the following additional details in mind: (1) the authors of *tawarikh* lived in cities (mainly Delhi) and hardly ever in villages. (2) They often wrote their histories for Sultans in the hope of rich rewards. (3) These authors advised rulers on the need to preserve an “ideal” social order based on **birthright** and **gender distinctions**. Their ideas were not shared by everybody.

In 1236 Sultan Iltutmish’s daughter, Raziyya, became Sultan. The chronicler of the age, Minhaj-i Siraj, recognised that she was more able and qualified than all her brothers. But he was not comfortable at having a queen as ruler. Nor were the nobles happy at her attempts to rule independently. She was removed from the throne in 1240.

### What Minhaj-i Siraj thought about Raziyya

Minhaj-i Siraj thought that the queen’s rule went against the ideal social order created by God, in which women were supposed to be subordinate to men. He therefore asked: “In the register of God’s creation, since her account did not fall under the column of men, how did she gain from all of her excellent qualities?”

On her inscriptions and coins Raziyya mentioned that she was the daughter of Sultan Iltutmish. This was in contrast to the queen Rudramadevi (1262-1289), of the Kakatiya dynasty of Warangal, part of modern Andhra Pradesh. Rudramadevi changed her name on her inscriptions and pretended she was a man. Another queen, Didda, ruled in Kashmir (980-1003). Her title is interesting: it comes from “didi” or “elder sister”, an obviously affectionate term given to a loved ruler by her subjects.

**Birthright**  
*Privileges claimed on account of birth. For example, people believed that nobles inherited their rights to govern, because they were born in certain families.*

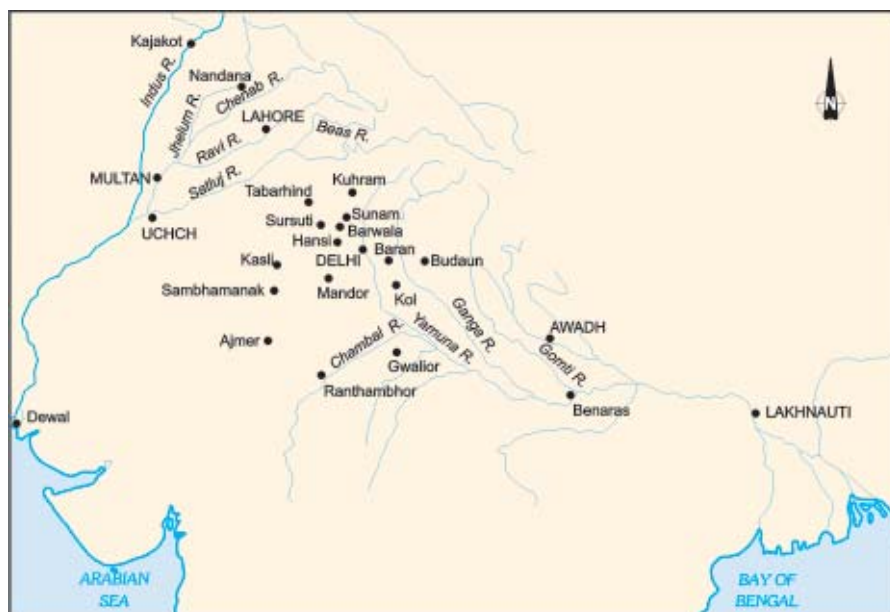
**Gender distinctions**  
*Social and biological differences between women and men. Usually, these differences are used to argue that men are superior to women.*



Express Minhaj’s ideas in your own words. Do you think Raziyya shared these ideas? Why do you think it was so difficult for a woman to be a ruler?

## From garrison town to empire The expansion of the Delhi Sultanate

**Map 2**  
Major cities captured  
by Shamsuddin  
Iltutmish.



**Hinterland**  
The lands  
adjacent to a city  
or port that supply  
it with goods and  
services.

**Garrison town**  
A fortified  
settlement, with  
soldiers.

In the early thirteenth century the control of the Delhi Sultans rarely went beyond heavily fortified towns occupied by garrisons. The Sultans seldom controlled the **hinterland** of the cities and were therefore dependent upon trade, tribute or plunder for supplies.

Controlling **garrison towns** in distant Bengal and Sind from Delhi was extremely difficult. Rebellion, war, even bad weather could snap fragile communication routes. The state was also challenged by Mongol invasions from Afghanistan and by governors who rebelled at any sign of the Sultan's weakness. The Sultanate barely survived these challenges. Its expansion occurred during the reigns of Ghiyasuddin Balban, Alauddin Khalji and Muhammad Tughluq.

The first set of campaigns along the "internal frontier" of the Sultanate aimed at consolidating the hinterlands of the garrison towns. During these campaigns forests were cleared in the Ganga-Yamuna doab and hunter-gatherers and pastoralists expelled from their habitat.

These lands were given to peasants and agriculture was encouraged. New fortresses and towns were established to protect trade routes and to promote regional trade.

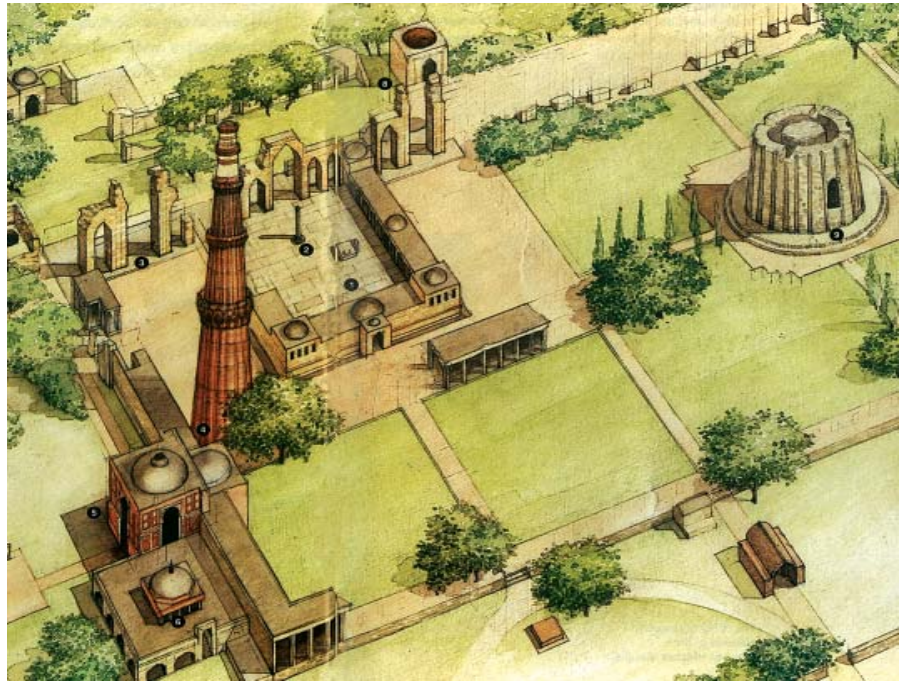
The second expansion occurred along the “external frontier” of the Sultanate. Military expeditions into southern India started during the reign of Alauddin Khalji (see Map 3) and culminated with Muhammad Tughluq. In their campaigns, Sultanate armies captured elephants, horses and slaves and carried away precious metals.

By the end of Muhammad Tughluq’s reign, 150 years after somewhat humble beginnings, the armies of the Delhi Sultanate had marched across a large part of the subcontinent. They had defeated rival armies and seized cities. The Sultanate collected taxes from the peasantry and dispensed justice in its realm. But how complete and effective was its control over such a vast territory?



**Map 3**  
Alauddin Khalji's  
campaign into  
South India.

Fig. 2  
*Quwwat al-Islam* mosque and minaret built during the last decade of the twelfth century. This was the congregational mosque of the first city built by the Delhi Sultans, described in the chronicles as *Dehli-i kuhna* (the old city). The mosque was enlarged by *Ilutmish* and *Alauddin Khalji*. The minar was built by three Sultans—*Qutbuddin Aybak*, *Ilutmish* and *Firuz Shah Tughluq*.



### The Masjid

A mosque is called a *masjid* in Arabic, literally a place where a Muslim prostrates in reverence to Allah. In a “congregational mosque” (*masjid-i jami* or *jama masjid*) Muslims read their prayers (*namaz*) together. Members of the congregation choose the most respected, learned male as their leader (*imam*) for the rituals of prayer. He also delivers the sermon (*khutba*) during the Friday prayer.

During prayer, Muslims stand facing Mecca. In India this is to the west. This is called the *qibla*.



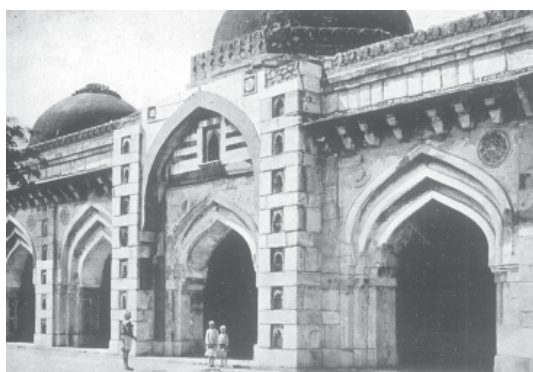
Fig. 3  
*Begumpuri mosque*, built in the reign of *Muhammad Tughluq*, was the main mosque of *Jahanpanah*, the “Sanctuary of the World”, his new capital in Delhi. See Map 1.



The Delhi Sultans built several mosques in cities all over the subcontinent. These demonstrated their claims to be protectors of Islam and Muslims. Mosques also helped to create the sense of a community of believers



Fig. 4  
Moth ki Masjid, built in the reign of Sikandar Lodi by his minister.



who shared a belief system and a code of conduct. It was necessary to reinforce this idea of a community because Muslims came from a variety of backgrounds.

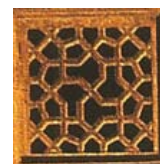


Fig. 5  
Mosque of Jamali Kamali, built in the late 1520s.



Compare Figures 2,3,4 and 5. What similarities and differences do you note amongst the mosques? The mosques in Figures 3, 4 and 5 show an evolution in architectural tradition that culminates in Shah Jahan's mosque in Delhi (see fig 7 in Chapter 5).

## A closer look: Administration and Consolidation under the Khaljis and Tughluqs

The consolidation of a kingdom as vast as the Delhi Sultanate needed reliable governors and administrators. Rather than appointing aristocrats and landed chieftains as governors, the early Delhi Sultans, especially Iltutmish, favoured their special slaves purchased for military service, called *bandagan* in Persian. They were carefully trained to man some of the most important political offices in the kingdom. Since they were totally dependent upon their master, the Sultan could trust and rely upon them.



A **client** is someone who is under the protection of another, a dependent or hanger-on.

## Slaves rather than sons

The Sultans were advised: “A slave, whom one has brought up and promoted, must be looked after for it needs a whole lifetime and good luck to find a worthy and experienced slave. Wise men have said that a worthy and experienced slave is better than a son ...”



*Can you think of any reason why a slave would be better than a son?*

The Khaljis and Tughluqs continued to use *bandagan* and also raised people of humble birth, who were often their clients, to high political positions. They were appointed as generals and governors. However, this also introduced an element of political instability.

Slaves and **clients** were loyal to their masters and patrons, but not to their heirs. New Sultans had their own servants. As a result the accession of a new monarch often saw conflict between the old and the new nobility. The patronage of these humble people by the Delhi Sultans also shocked many elites and the authors of Persian *tawarikh* criticised the Delhi Sultans for appointing the “low and base-born” to high offices.

## Officials of Sultan Muhammad Tughluq

Sultan Muhammad Tughluq appointed Aziz Khummar, a wine distiller, Firuz Hajjam, a barber, Mank a Tabbakh, a cook, and two gardeners, Ladha and Pira, to high administrative posts. Ziyauddin Barani, a mid-fourteenth-century-chronicler, reported their appointments as a sign of the Sultan’s loss of political judgement and his incapacity to rule.



*Why do you think Barani criticised the Sultan?*

Like the earlier Sultans, the Khalji and Tughluq monarchs appointed military commanders as governors of territories of varying sizes. These lands were called *iqta* and their holder was called *iqtadar* or *muqti*. The duty of the *muqtis* was to lead military campaigns and maintain law and order in their *iqtas*. In exchange for their military services, the *muqtis* collected the revenues of their assignments as salary. They also paid their soldiers from these revenues. Control over *muqtis* was most effective if their office was not inheritable and if they were assigned *iqtas* for a short period of time before being shifted. These harsh conditions of service were rigorously imposed during the reigns of Alauddin Khalji and Muhammad Tughluq. Accountants were appointed by the state to check the amount of revenue collected by the *muqtis*. Care was taken that the *muqti* collected only the taxes prescribed by the state and that he kept the required number of soldiers.

As the Delhi Sultans brought the hinterland of the cities under their control, they forced the landed chieftains — the *samanta* aristocrats — and rich landlords to accept their authority. Under Alauddin Khalji the state brought the assessment and collection of land revenue under its own control. The rights of the local chieftains to levy taxes were cancelled and they were also forced to pay taxes. The Sultan's administrators measured the land and kept careful accounts. Some of the old chieftains and landlords served the Sultanate as revenue collectors and assessors. There were three types of taxes – (1) on cultivation called *kharaj* and amounting to about 50 per cent of the peasant's produce, (2) on cattle and (3) on houses.

It is important to remember that large parts of the subcontinent remained outside the control of the Delhi Sultans. It was difficult to control distant provinces like Bengal from Delhi and soon after annexing southern India, the entire region became independent. Even in the Gangetic plain there were forested areas

that Sultanate forces could not penetrate. Local chieftains established their rule in these regions. Sometimes rulers like Alauddin Khalji and Muhammad Tughluq could force their control in these areas but only for a short duration.

### Chieftains and their fortifications

Ibn Battuta, a fourteenth-century traveller from Morocco, Africa, explained that chieftains sometimes “fortified themselves in mountains, in rocky, uneven and rugged places as well as in bamboo groves. In India the bamboo is not hollow; it is big. Its several parts are so intertwined that even fire cannot affect them, and they are on the whole very strong. The chieftains live in these forests which serve them as ramparts, inside which are their cattle and their crops. There is also water for them within, that is, rain water which collects there. Hence they cannot be subdued except by powerful armies, who entering these forests, cut down the bamboos with specially prepared instruments.”



*Describe the ways in which the chieftains arranged for their defence.*

The Mongols under Genghis Khan invaded Transoxiana in north-east Iran in 1219 and the Delhi Sultanate faced their onslaught soon after. Mongol attacks on the Delhi Sultanate increased during the reign of Alauddin Khalji and in the early years of Muhammad Tughluq’s rule. This forced the two rulers to mobilise a large standing army in Delhi which posed a huge administrative challenge. Let us see how the two Sultans dealt with this.

| Alauddin Khalji  | Muhammad Tughluq  |
|--|---|
| <p>Delhi was <b>attacked</b> twice, in 1299/1300 and 1302-03. As a defensive measure, Alauddin Khalji raised a large standing army.</p>  | <p>The Sultanate was <b>attacked</b> in the early years of Muhammad Tughluq's reign. The Mongol army was defeated. Muhammad Tughluq was confident about the strength of his army and his resources to plan an attack on Transoxiana. He therefore raised a large standing army.</p>   |
| <p>Alauddin <b>constructed</b> a new garrison town named Siri for his soldiers. See Map 1.</p>   | <p>Rather than <b>constructing</b> a new garrison town, the oldest of the four cities of Delhi (Dehli-i Kuhna) was emptied of its residents and the soldiers garrisoned there. The residents of the old city were sent to the new capital of Daulatabad in the south.</p>   |
| <p>The soldiers had to be <b>fed</b>. This was done through the produce collected as tax from lands between the Ganga and Yamuna. Tax was fixed at 50 per cent of the peasant's yield.</p>   | <p>Produce from the same area was collected as tax to <b>feed</b> the army. But to meet the need of the large number of soldiers the Sultan levied additional taxes. This coincided with famine in the area.</p>  |
| <p>The soldiers had to be <b>paid</b>. Alauddin chose to pay his soldiers salaries in cash rather than <i>iqtas</i>. The soldiers would buy their supplies from merchants in Delhi and it was thus feared that merchants would raise their prices. To stop this, Alauddin controlled the prices of goods in Delhi. Prices were carefully surveyed by officers, and merchants who did not sell at the prescribed rates were punished.</p> | <p>Muhammad Tughluq also <b>paid</b> his soldiers cash salaries. But instead of controlling prices, he used a "token" currency, somewhat like present-day paper currency, but made out of cheap metals, not gold and silver. People in the fourteenth century did not trust these coins. They were very smart: they saved their gold and silver coins and paid all their taxes to the state with this token currency. This cheap currency could also be counterfeited easily.</p> |
| <p>Alauddin's <b>administrative measures</b> were quite successful and chroniclers praised his reign for its cheap prices and efficient supplies of goods in the market. He successfully withstood the threat of Mongol invasions.</p>   | <p>Muhammad Tughluq's <b>administrative measures</b> were a failure. His campaign into Kashmir was a disaster. He then gave up his plans to invade Transoxiana and disbanded his large army. Meanwhile, his administrative measures created complications. The shifting of people to Daulatabad was resented. The raising of taxes and famine in the Ganga-Yamuna belt led to widespread rebellion. And finally, the "token" currency had to be recalled.</p>                     |

In this list of Muhammad Tughluq's failures we sometimes forget that for the first time in the history of the Sultanate, a Delhi Sultan planned a campaign to capture Mongol territory. Unlike Alauddin's defensive measures, Muhammad Tughluq's measures were conceived as a part of a military offensive against the Mongols.

## The Sultanate in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries

Take a look at Table 1 again. You will notice that after the Tughluqs, the Sayyid and Lodi dynasties ruled from Delhi and Agra until 1526. By then, Jaunpur, Bengal, Malwa, Gujarat, Rajasthan and the entire south India had independent rulers who established flourishing states and prosperous capitals. This was also the period which saw the emergence of new ruling groups like the Afghans and the Rajputs.

Some of the states established in this period were small but powerful and extremely well administered. Sher Shah Sur (1540-1545) started his career as the manager of a small territory for his uncle in Bihar and eventually challenged and defeated the Mughal emperor Humayun (1530-1540, 1555-1556). Sher Shah captured Delhi and established his own dynasty. Although the Suri dynasty ruled for only fifteen years (1540-1555), it introduced an administration that borrowed elements from Alauddin Khalji and made them more efficient. Sher Shah's administration became the model followed by the great emperor Akbar (1556-1605) when he consolidated the Mughal Empire.

## The “Three Orders”, the “Peace of God”, Knights and the Crusades

The idea of the “Three Orders” was first formulated in France in the early eleventh century. It divided society into three classes: those who prayed, those who fought, and those who tilled the land. This division of society into “Three Orders” was supported by the Church to consolidate its dominant role in society. This helped the emergence of a new warrior group called knights.

The Church patronised this group and used them to propagate their idea of “Peace of God”. The attempt was to direct warriors away from conflict amongst themselves and send them instead on a campaign against the Muslims who had captured the city of Jerusalem. This led to a series of campaigns called the Crusades. These campaigns in the service of God and the Church completely altered the status of knights. Originally, these knights did not belong to the class of nobles. But by the end of the eleventh century in France, and a century later in Germany, the humble origins of these warriors were forgotten. By the twelfth century, nobles also wanted to be known as knights.



### Imagine

You are a peasant in Alauddin Khalji's or Muhammad Tughluq's reign and you cannot pay the taxes demanded by the Sultan. What will you do?

### Let's recall

1. Which ruler first established his or her capital at Delhi?
2. What was the language of administration under the Delhi Sultans?
3. In whose reign did the Sultanate reach its farthest extent?
4. From which country did Ibn Battuta travel to India?

## KEYWORDS



*iqta*

*tarikh*

garrison

Mongols

gender

*kharaj*



### Let's understand

5. According to the "Circle of Justice", why was it important for military commanders to keep the interests of the peasantry in mind?
6. What is meant by the "internal" and "external" frontiers of the Sultanate?
7. What were the steps taken to ensure that muqtis performed their duties? Why do you think they may have wanted to defy the orders of the Sultans?
8. What was the impact of the Mongol invasions on the Delhi Sultanate?

### Let's discuss

9. Do you think the authors of tawarikh would provide information about the lives of ordinary men and women?
10. Raziyya Sultan was unique in the history of the Delhi Sultanate. Do you think women leaders are accepted more readily today?
11. Why were the Delhi Sultans interested in cutting down forests? Does deforestation occur for the same reasons today?

### Let's do

12. Find out whether there are any buildings built by the Delhi Sultans in your area. Are there any other buildings in your area that were built between the twelfth and fifteenth centuries? Describe some of these buildings, and draw sketches of them.