
UNIT 13 RISE OF TURKS AND MONGOLS IN CENTRAL ASIA

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13.0 OBJECTIVES

The rise of the Turks and Mongols; their rapid conquests and expansion over the regions of Central Asia and the adjoining territories between the tenth and thirteenth centuries, marks the beginning of a momentous period in history. Its consequences for India were direct, palpable and far-reaching. After reading this Unit you should be able to:

- know who the Turks and Mongols were and what precisely was their role in an exciting period of history,
- acquaint yourself with the geography and some of the characteristics of Central Asia as a region of considerable historical significance, and
- place medieval India in a larger historical context of political and social developments.

13.1 INTRODUCTION

The tenth century witnessed a westward movement of a warlike nomadic people inhabiting the eastern corners of the Asian continent. Then came in wave upon wave, each succeeding invasion more powerful and more extensive than the last. In a relatively short span of time, the barbarian hordes had overrun and brought down the once prosperous empires and kingdoms of Central and West Asia, reaching the shores of the Mediterranean and the Black Sea. While between the tenth and twelfth centuries the invaders were primarily 'Turks', the invasion of the thirteenth to fifteenth centuries involved a kindred but more ferocious people, the Mongols.

Although the devastations caused by these movements were immense—particularly those wrought by the Mongols—they left behind a trail of blood and gruesome massacre wherever their advance was resisted. These invaders were eventually tamed by the civilizations they had conquered. Settling down in conquered territories, the resulting fusion between them and their new environments became the basis of a new order.

Mahmud of Ghazni's invasions of India at the close of the tenth century, followed some hundred years later by the Ghorian invasions (both Ghazni and Ghor are in Afghanistan) were distant projections of these vast nomadic movements. As in other

independent political entity; the Delhi Sultanate in the early years of the thirteenth century. The term 'Delhi Sultanate' signifies the rule of Turks over large parts of Northern India from their capital at Delhi. In more than two centuries of existence, the Sultanate gave birth to institutions—political, social and economic—which though greatly different from the ones existing earlier, were a unique combination of what the Turks had brought with and what they found in India. One could say the same about the Mughal empire which succeeded the Delhi Sultanate.

In this Unit we will be taking a bird's-eye view of developments triggered off in Central Asia by the rise of Turks and Mongols.

13.2 CENTRAL ASIA

Before we discuss the rise of Turks and Mongols, it is necessary to form a mental picture of the regions comprising Central Asia and to acquaint ourselves with some of their outstanding features. 'Central Asia' is a loose geographical term that refers to the huge and varied territory bounded in the South by an immense chain of mountains of which the Himalayas form a part. Its northern limits may be roughly placed around the Ural mountains; the western along the Aral and Caspian Seas; and the eastern somewhere between the lakes Balkash and Baikal, perhaps around the river Irtysh (See Map).

As the name of a region Central Asia has at least one other competitor, namely, Turkestan, though not identical in geographical spread, Turkestan does cover a very large portion of the territories one includes in Central Asia. Perhaps it also offers a more apt description of a region whose population is predominantly Turkic in composition. But, when using the term in an historical context, one has to remember that 'Turkestan' is an ethnonym: it signifies an ethnic territory as well as a human community. And, in both respects, changes down the centuries have been profound. Both the physical and human boundaries of Turkestan have shifted, contracted and expanded by turns—until perhaps our own times when modern states acquired relatively stable boundaries and populations. In terms of modern political frontiers, it comprises the Soviet Socialist Republic of Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Kirghizia and 'Chinese Turkestan'.

13.2.1 Central Asia: A More Detailed View

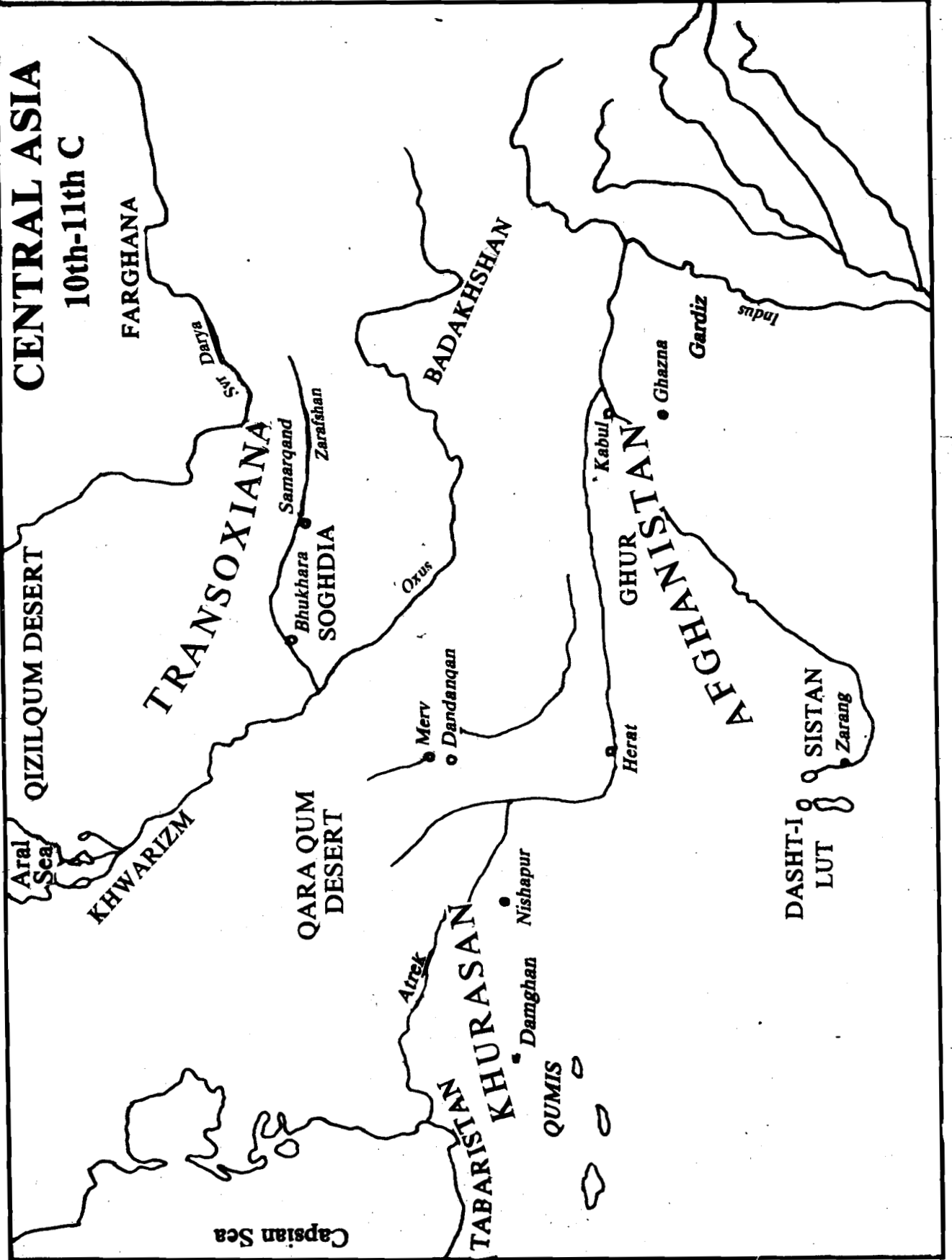
As we close in on Central Asia, focusing attention on its distinctive natural features, an area of considerable complexity comes into view. It looks like an extraordinary mosaic of mountains, deserts, oases, steppes and river valleys. The foothills and the valleys contain oases, i.e. fertile islands of cultivation surrounded by desert. And beyond the deserts are the Eurasian steppes—those limitless expanses of arid and patchy vegetation. Towards the north and east the Steppes once again disappear into the great Siberian desert.

As we shall see later, the steppes have been crucial in determining the course of history of Central Asia and indeed of the world. For, at least, a few thousand years the steppe environment could support only one kind of life—the nomadic as opposed to sedentary.

The oases, by contrast, were the rallying points of settled existence. The history of civilized communities in Central Asia goes back to a few thousand years at least. Periods of peace, intermittently ruptured by barbarians churning on the periphery, led to the extension of irrigation works and agriculture. With the growth of trade and handicrafts, towns sprouted. Together these enabled garden kingdoms and states to flourish. The oases were thus real counterpoints to the preponderance of deserts and steppes. Owing to them Central Asia could emerge as the centre piece in a commercial highway connecting the far-flung civilizations of India, China, Mesopotamia, and Europe. We will talk more about this a little later.

13.2.2 Central Asia: An Ensemble of Micro Regions

At another level, Central Asia could be seen as composed of distinct micro regions, or, in other words, territorial units that owe their identity to a peculiar mix of



geography and history—Khwarizm, Khurasan, Transoxiana, Soghdiana, Semirech Farghana—these are some of the names you will frequently come across in any historical literature dealing with the area. Most of these regions have been broadly indicated on the map.

Transoxiana (i.e. Land across the Oxus) is the region carved out by the rivers Oxus and Jaxartes (also known as, the Amu Darya and the Syr Darya respectively). Both flow into the inland Aral Sea and are the two most important rivers of Central Asia. The Arabs, who conquered Transoxiana in the eighth century (A.D.), called it **Mawaraunnahr**, literally meaning "that which is beyond the river". Along the middle of the Oxus-Jaxartes basin flows the Zarafshan river, after whose ancient name **Soghd**, the region came to be called **Soghdiana**. The two most famous towns of Central Asia, Samarqand and Bukhara, are located within this tract.

To the south of the Aral Sea, around the fertile delta of the Oxus, is the region known as **Khwarizm** (modern Khiva). Here, as early as the seventh or sixth century (B.C.), a large centralized state came into existence which lasted a few centuries. At the end of the first century A.D., Khwarizm became part of the vast Kushan empire which straddled the Hindukush and included the whole of North India within its fold. Cultural contacts between India and Central Asia were greatly strengthened as a consequence.

To the west of Transoxiana begins the region of **Khurasan**. As a land-locked region, Khurasan has no access to the sea. Its rivers peter out into lakes and swamps. But around its oases excellent pastures abound. These have recurrently attracted nomads to descend into its valleys from across the steep mountains that jut out into Central Asia from the Eurasian steppes. "Because of such movements of people Khurasan inevitably became a cockpit...." The Arabs used it as a springboard to conquer Central Asia.

To the east of the Jaxartes, along its middle reaches is the Farghana valley—the ancestral home of Babur, the first Mughal ruler of India. As early as B.C. 102 the Chinese subdued Farghana and, henceforth, Chinese influence over Central Asia remained an abiding factor.

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) Give the main geographical features of Central Asia.

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- 2) Name a few Micro-regions of Central Asia giving their geographical extent.

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Write five lines on the region called Turkestan.

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13.3 PASTORAL NOMADISM

The Turks and Mongols were the product of deserts and steppes that encircle Central Asia in a massive area, extending north and east of Transoxiana. More specifically, they descended from the mass of nomads who roamed in the area of the Altai mountains, south of Lake Baikal—regions that are now part of outer Mongolia. They had a primitive mobile civilization based on tribal organization and ownership of herds of cattle, sheep and horses. In addition, the tribes often possessed camels, mules and asses. The animals supplied most of the essential needs of the nomad in the way of food, clothing and shelter. Milk and flesh gave him nourishment. The hide of animals was used as clothing, and also to make tents, *yurts*, in which he lived.

Pastoral nomadism was governed by one great drive—the search for grazing lands. This kept the nomads constantly on the move, from place to place, with their flocks and herds. In the absence of agriculture and fixed habitation, the nomads' attachment to land was minimal, lasting only as long as it yielded fodder for the animals. When the tribes camped, each tent or household was allotted a piece of land for its exclusive use. Once exhausted, the tribes migrated in search of new pastures.

Mobility, thus, was central to nomadic society, and the horse its most outstanding asset. One description of pastoral nomads aptly characterises them as a people whose country was the back of a horse. In consequence, among the Mongols, for instance, no offence was greater than stealing a horse. It invited execution.

Horsemanship combines with skill in archery made the nomads a formidable fighting force. The Mongols brought the art to perfection in the thirteenth century. Galloping at full speed, they could rain arrows in every direction—forward, rear, and sideways—with deadly accuracy.

Opportunities for testing and amplifying these skills were provided in plenty by the steppe environment where conflict over grazing lands were normal occurrences. Periodically, these magnified into large-scale bloody battles.

It would, however, be too simplistic to see all nomadic irruptions into settled areas as merely a spill over of conflicts within the steppes. The inadequacies of a pastoral economy have as much to explain. Although it met most of the basic needs of the nomads, specially when supplemented with hunting or fishing, pastoralism had one serious drawback: Unlike agriculture, it produced no durable reserves. Its products were rapidly consumed. Therefore, nomadic urge was not only to acquire more and better foraging lands but also products of agrarian communities. Pastoralism by its very nature veered to a 'mixed economy'—secured by trade and alliance or by aggression.

13.4 CIVILIZATION AND TURKISH NOMADS: EARLY CONTACTS

According to an old view, it was the Oxus that clearly demarcated civilization from barbarism. The classic expression of this view was the one given by Firdausi, the famous tenth century poet at Mahmud Ghazni's court. In his *Shahnama*, Firdausi poses a stark antithesis between the two worlds of Iran and Turan: "Two elements fire and water which rage against each other in the depths of the heart." For Firdausi, Iran was the realm of the Turks, of barbarism. A natural antipathy, born of opposed ways of life, set apart the two racial groups.

However a closer look at the Oxus regions reveals that the two worlds had been in

tenth century. Although the Oxus had been the historic bastion against nomadic incursions, it was relentlessly breached by the nomads, no less in times of peace than during violent collisions. Far from being stark and clear, by the tenth century the boundary had become greatly blurred.

13.4.1 The Tiukiu Empire

The first contact between civilization and Turkish nomads dates back to the mid-sixth century when a vast nomad empire, extending all the way from the borders of China to Byzantium, came into existence. The empire, known as the Tiukiu empire, was really a confederacy of twenty-two tribes of a people then called the Toghuz-Oghuz. It lasted for close to two hundred years. During the next three centuries, the Tiukiu dominions in Central Asia came to be partitioned and repartitioned between its constituent tribes and other newly arrived Turkic nomads (the Qipchaqs, the Qarluqs and the Oghuz called Ghur). Stray elements of the Oghuz had already found their way into the upper Oxus lands a couple of centuries earlier. The en bloc migration of the Oghuz across Siberia during the eighth century brought them "into the field of Muslim Writers." The appellation of 'Turks' or 'Turkeman', which came into use in the late tenth century, was initially applied by these writers to Oghuz tribesmen. Its gradual extension to Turkic nomads in general appears to have proceeded alongside a progressive weakening of the Oghuz ethnic identity as tribes either broke away from the larger confederacy or new ones were incorporated into it after being defeated.

13.4.2 Two Forms of Contact

The contact between the Turks and settled people took two major forms: (i) military conflict, and (ii) commercial transactions. In either event the result was mutual assimilation and acculturation. Let us first discuss the military conflict.

The natural instinct of the nomads was to conduct raids into settled areas south of the Oxus. To ward off these attacks, states in western Asia evolved an active defence policy centred on Transoxiana—the principal staying zone for invasions from the east. During the sixth century the Sassanids, who ruled Iraq and Persia, were the bearers of this mission. In the eighth century it was the Arabs. After penetrating Transoxiana and displacing a considerable Turkish population east of the Jaxartes, the Arabs laid out fortified walls and *rabats* (frontier-posts) along the frontier, manned by a military guard system. On either side, Muslim and Turkish, the frontier bristled with colonies of guards. On the Muslim side, they were called *ghazis*, i.e. men whose business it was to defend the faith against infidel hordes. Though belonging to hostile camps, both groups nonetheless "came to live the same kind of borderline existence, adopting each other's weapons, tactics and ways of life and gradually forming a common military frontier society, more similar to each other than to the societies from which they came and which they defended."

In Transoxiana the distinction between Turk and non-Turk had been worn thin by the time of the Arab takeover in the eighth century. Internal disturbances had often prompted Transoxianean leaders to enlist Turkish mercenaries as a counterbalancing force. At least one account has it that the earliest settlers of the Bukhara oasis came from 'Turkestan'.

The second form of contact was established through trade and commerce. The centre of a nomad empire has always attracted merchants because of the ready market it provided for products of the settlements. In the case of the Tiukiu empire, the attraction was more pronounced because it lay across the great Silk Road, the premier channel of international commerce. The bulk of these materials was of every day use, like leather, hides, tallow, wax, and honey. It also included luxuries like furs. Then there was the regular traffic in slaves—also procured from the steppes. From these northerly regions the foods arrived in Khurasanian towns lying on caravan routes and eventually reached Iraq and Baghdad, the supreme centres of consumption in West Asia, via the transit trade.

Tenth century accounts refer to numerous settlements of the Turks in the lower Syr Darya region whose inhabitants "were not pure nomads but were also cattle-raisers

fishermen and agriculturists." Most of these Turks were of Oghuz extraction, the group under whose leadership the Turks emerged the rulers of Central and West Asia.

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) Write in brief the main features of nomadic life of people in Central Asia.

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- 2) Write five lines on Tiukiu Empire.

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- 3) Discuss the main items of trade between Turks and settled people. Which trade route was followed by them?

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13.5 TURKISH IRRUPTIONS

Not only were the Turks known, settled, or commercially active in the civilized parts of Central Asia, they often rose to positions of considerable influence in the prevailing military administrative apparatus. The dominant social classes of pre-Islamic Transoxiana, the **dihqans** (small landed proprietors) and merchants had made increasing use of Turkish mercenaries as the coercive arm for guarding and extending their patrimony.

The Arabs, who conquered Transoxiana (in the early eighth) century, pushed the Turks beyond the Jaxartes, converting **Mawaraunnahr** into a bulwark against barbarian inroads. However, in the long run, the idea of employing Turks as soldiers was not lost upon the Arabs either. The hardy steppe background made the Turk a natural warrior. With training and discipline he could be made into a first rate fighting machine. Moreover, he could be bought like any other commodity: markets in and around Transoxiana abounded in slaves captured from Central Asian steppes and the plains north of **Mawaraunnahr**.

Under the Omayyads (A.D. 661-750) recruitment to the military was almost totally confined to the Arabs. The replacement of the Omayyads by the Abbasids in A.D. 750 as undermined the Arab monopoly of the army especially in the decades after the Caliphate of Harun al Rashid (d. 809 A.D.). The civil wars among the sons and successor of this last great Caliph shook the foundations of the Abbasid empire. In these circumstances, recruiting mercenaries of foreign origin, not involved in the internal affairs of the empire, seemed to be the answer.

The Caliph Mu'tassim (A.D. 833-842) was the first to surround himself with a large body of Turkish slaves and make it the base of his troops. In order to impart them a distinct and separate identity, the Turkish soldiery was kept well away from the indigenous population and could only marry women of the same origin: "Thus he created a sort of military class, whose role—was to protect the Caliph and the regime without taking part in the palace struggles or in the political or religious internal quarrels. But the reverse happened, and the interference of this class in the conduct of the state took on proportions which became more and more disastrous as the officers of the guard, divided into rival clans.....supporting different claimants....and did not hesitate in so doing to trigger off palace revolutions."

With the weakening of the power of Abbasid Caliphs their control over Islamic world became nominal and limited just to issue **farmans** to confirm their authority. It gave way to the emergency of a number of small independent kingdoms during the 10th century the Jahirids, the Saffavids, the Buwaihids, Qara-Khanids and the Samanids.

Alaptgin, the Samanid governor and slave of the Turkish origin, established an independent kingdom at Ghazna. The Ghaznavid kingdom became prominent under Mahmud Ghaznavi (A.D. 998-1030). Under him, the Iranian influence reached its peak. Mahmud claimed to have traced his descent from Iranian mythical hero Afrasiyab. This process Islamised and Persianised the Turks completely. Mahmud also made regular inroads in India. As a result, Punjab became part of the Ghaznavid Empire.

Mahmud's death was followed by the emergence of the mighty Seljuqs. They soon overran Iran, Syria and Transoxiana. These developments gave a great jolt to the power of the Ghaznavids which became confined to Ghazna and parts of Punjab only.

During the twelfth century, the Seljuq power was destroyed by a group of Turkish tribes. The vacuum created by the Seljuqs led to the rise of the Khwarizmian in Iran and the Ghorid power in north-west Afghanistan. To begin with, the Ghorids were vassals of Ghazna. On the other hand, the Khwarizmian rulers started in a big way engulfing Ghazni and almost whole of Central Asia and Iran. Under such circumstances it was not possible for the Ghorids to expand at the cost of the Khwarizmian power. The possible direction left was India. This process of expansion started towards the end of 12th century.

13.6 THE MONGOLS

In the early decades of the thirteenth century Asia and Europe experienced a new wave of nomad conquerors from the east, an invasion more formidable and devastating than any other known to history before. These new invaders were the Mongols, who are best known for the great empire which they formed under Chengiz Khan. By the close of the thirteenth century, the Mongol empire covered a vast portion of the known world: China, Manchuria, Korea, North Vietnam, Tibet, Turkestan, Afghanistan, Iran, Mesopotamia, Southern Russia and Siberia.

Before rising to world dominion, the Mongols were dwellers of the steppe region, north of China and east of Lake Baikal. To their east lived a kindred people, the Tatars; presumably Mongolised Turks, who lent the name of 'Tartars' to the Mongols in European literature in conjunction with **Tartarus**, the Greek word for Hell. To the west of the Mongols lived the Keraites and Naimans, once again people of Turkish origin and speech. All these people were in different stages of development, combining herding with hunting and fishing in varying degrees.

The sudden rise of Mongols to power appears to fall in line with an old pattern characteristic of the steppes. Long periods of internecine conflict between bands of nomads would throw up a leader of outstanding ability who after ironing out differences between the warring hordes welded them into a powerful coalition. Through choice or compulsion, the smaller, fragmented nomadic groups were absorbed into the coalition. The next stage saw the nomads aggressively directed at the surrounding sedentary societies.

13.6.1 Chengiz Khan and The Steppe Aristocracy

Chengiz Khan built the Mongols into a stupefying striking force. Born of a powerful Mongol chief sometime in the sixties of 12th century. Chengiz Khan (also spelt as Chingiz, Chengez Khan), or Temuchin as he was originally called. Three decades of a bitter struggle within the steppes paved the way for Temuchin, who eventually emerged as the pre-eminent leader of the Mongols. During this time he developed his skill both as a warrior and a canny tactician who excelled in dividing and circumventing his enemies.

The nucleus of Chengiz Khan's army, and his imperial government, came from a corps of carefully selected guards (**bahadur**). Units of the Mongol army were put under command of generals drawn from it. Military mobilisation reached its peak under Chengiz Khan. Using a well-established nomadic tradition, he enrolled all adult males into **mingghan**, literally "units of ten thousand". The **mingghan** in turn were divided into smaller units of ten and hundred. Ten **mingghans** constituted a **tuman** and these were deployed for large-scale operations. Each of these units was placed under the command of a general whose worth had been personally tested by Chengiz Khan. The authority of the commander extended over the soldiers and their families. Thus, administrative control and military mobilisation were parts of a single mechanism.

13.6.2 Conquests and Expansion

The first military efforts of Chengiz Khan were devoted to bringing the pastoral tribes of the eastern steppes under his sway. Temuchin now ruled over an immense confederacy of Mongol, Turkic and Manchurian tribes. He was the head of all their **kibitki** (tents) and his family held the conquered/hordes in patrimony.

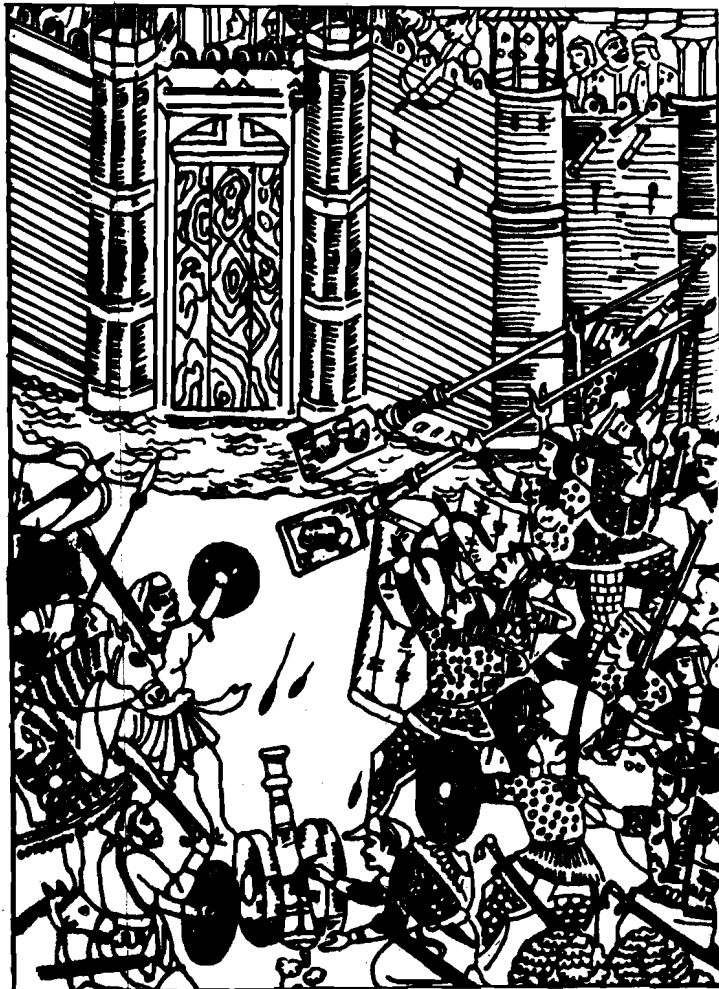
At a **kurultai** (assembly of nomad chiefs) held in 1206, Temuchin was declared "Qaghan of all Mongolia" and received the title of Chengiz Khan.

Internally consolidated, the Mongols burst out of the confines of Mongolia. At the end of a series of annual campaigns beginning in A.D. 1211, they breached the Great Wall of China and laid hold of Peking.

Soon after, their attention was drawn to Transoxiana and Khurasan which formed the dominions of the Khwarizm Shah. The defence of the Khwarizm empire crumbled before Mongol siege-craft which used battering rams, flame-emitting machines (using naphtha), mangonels or catapults (**manjaniq**), etc. Bukhara and Samarkand fell in 1220 in the midst of fearful carnage. A witness reporting on the state of Bukhara said: "They came, they sacked, they burnt, they slew, they plundered, they departed."

It had taken the Mongols just about three years, 1219-22, to complete the annexation of Transoxiana and Khurasan. Two years after, returning to Mongolia in 1225, Chengiz Khan died. By then the whole of northern China had been annexed. The empire was divided among his sons. Ogedei, his third son, was declared the Great Khan in 1229. They as yet unconquered Eurasian steppes went to Jochi. The second son, Chaghtai, received Turkestan, and Tolui, the youngest, got the Mongolian homeland.

Hulagu, one of the successors of Chengiz Khan, attacked Baghdad in A.D. 1258. The city was the capital of the Abbasids. It perished in blood and flame. According to a conservative estimate some 800,000 were savagely murdered. The Abbasid Caliphate himself met a violent end.



1. Manjaniq

Finally, four great empires crystallised out of the Mongol conquests: The **Golden Horde** ruled the Volga steppe land and southern Russia; the **Ilkhans** who controlled Afghanistan and Iran; the **Chaghtai** empire which included most of Central Asia, and the empire of **Kublai Khan** which ruled over China and neighbouring territories. These empires lasted well into the 15th century.

Check Your Progress 3

1) How Turks got involved with the Arab caliphate?

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2) How Chengiz Khan rose to Power?

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3) Give a brief account of Chengiz Khan's conquests outside Mongolia.

Rise of Turks and Mongols
in Central Asia

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13.7 LET US SUM UP

We hope this Unit has given you a general overview of the developments in Central Asia during 10-13th century. Now you know briefly the geographical features of Central Asia. You have also learnt about the nature of pastoral nomadism. In due course, the Turks, who were mainly nomadic tribes, established powerful kingdoms. We also described the consolidation of Mongol power under Chengiz Khan and the Mongols' expansion into Central Asia, etc. In the next Unit, we will narrate the expansion of the Turks towards India, and the establishment of the Delhi Sultanate by them.

13.8 KEY WORDS

Nomad:	Groups of people who do not have a settled habitation.
Eurasian Steppes:	A geographic region on the borders of Europe & Asia.
Kushan Empire:	The Empire covered the north-western part of India and ruled from mid first century A.D. to the end of third century A.D.
Land-locked region:	A geographic region which has no access to sea.
Shahnama:	A tenth century poetic work written by Firdausi in Persian.
Silk Route:	Overland route—starting from China passes through the North-West frontier of India, across Central Asia and Russia to the Baltic.
Omayyads:	The dynasty of Caliphs which ruled from A.D. 661—A.D. 750.
Tatars:	A nomadic tribe.

13.9 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) See Sec. 13.2
- 2) See Sub-sec. 13.2.2
- 3) See Sub-sec. 13.2.2

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) See Sec. 13.4
- 2) See Sub-sec. 13.4.1

Check Your Progress 3

- 1) See Sec. 13.5
- 2) See Sub-sec. 13.6.1
- 3) See Sub-sec. 13.6.2