

Revision Notes

Chapter 5: Nomadic Empires

Nomadic Empires can be said to be an imperial formation constructed by nomadic groups. The Mongols, under the leadership of Genghis Khan, established a transcontinental empire straddling Europe and Asia during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.

Sources:

- The steppe dwellers themselves usually produced no literature, so our knowledge of nomadic societies comes mainly from chronicles, travelogues and documents produced by city-based litterateurs. These authors often produced extremely ignorant and biased reports of nomadic life.
- The imperial success of the Mongols attracted many travelers. These individuals came from a variety of backgrounds – **Buddhist, Confucian, Christian, Turkish and Muslim**. Many of them produced sympathetic accounts and others hostile.
- The most outstanding sources of Mongols are Igor de Rachewiltz's '**The Secret History of Mongol**' and 'the Travelogues of Marco Polo'.

Rise of Mongol tribe:

In the early decades of the thirteenth century the great empires of the Euro-Asian continent realised the dangers posed to them by the arrival of a new political power in the steppes of Central Asia: Genghis Khan (d. 1227) had united the Mongol people.

Background:

- The Mongols were a diverse body of tribal people, spoke similar languages.
- Some of the Mongols were pastoralists while others were hunter-gatherers. The pastoralists tended horses, sheep and cattle, goats and camels.
- They lived nomadic life in the steppes of Central Asia in a tract of land in the area of the modern state of Mongolia. This was a majestic landscape with wide horizons, rolling plains, ringed by the snow-capped mountains, Gobi desert and drained by rivers and springs.



- Agriculture was possible in the pastoral regions but the Mongols did not take to agriculture. The Mongols lived in tents and travelled with their herds from their winter to summer pasture lands.
- These groups were constantly engaged in war with each other.
- Mongol society was patriarchal in nature.

Life and Career of Genghis Khan:

- Genghis Khan was born in 1162 CE, near the Onon River in the north of present-day Mongolia.
- His original name was **Temujin**, he was the son of Yesugei, the chieftain of the Kiyat clan.
- His father was murdered by a tribe at an early age and his mother, Oelun-eke, raised Temujin, his brothers and step-brothers in great hardship.
- Genghis Khan faced many problems in his childhood. Temujin was captured and enslaved for many years.
- Soon after his marriage, his wife, Borte, was kidnapped, and he had to fight to recover her.
- During these years of hardship he also managed to make important friends. The young Boghurchu was his first ally and remained a trusted friend; Jamuqa, his blood-brother was another.
- Temujin became the dominant personality in the politics of the steppe lands, a position that was recognised at an assembly of Mongol chieftains, where he was proclaimed the 'Great Khan of the Mongols' with the title Genghis Khan, the 'Oceanic Khan' or 'Universal Ruler'.

His conquests: China, Transoxiana, Khwarazm, Samarqand, Herat, Azerbaijan Russia between 1219 to 1222 CE

- The first of his concerns was to conquer **China**, divided at this time into three realms: the **Hsi Hsia dynasty** in the north-western provinces, **Chin dynasty** ruled north China and the Sung dynasty in south China.
- By 1209, the Hsi Hsia were defeated, the '**Great Wall of China**' was breached in 1213 and long drawn-out battles against the Chin continued until 1234 but Genghis Khan was satisfied enough with the progress of his campaigns to return to his Mongolia



- Sultan Muhammad, the ruler of **Khwarazm**, executed Mongol envoys worried of Mongol invasion. In the campaigns between 1219 and 1221 the great cities – **Otrar, Bukhara, Samarqand, Balkh, Gurganj, Merv, Nishapur and Herat** – surrendered to the Mongol forces.
- Towns that resisted were devastated by Mongols. A Mongol prince was killed during the siege operation at Nishapur.
- Mongol forces in pursuit of **Sultan Muhammad** pushed into **Azerbaijan** and defeated **Russian** forces. Another wing followed the Sultan's son, **Jalaluddin**, into **Afghanistan** and the **Sindh** province.

Why did Genghis Khan return to Mongolia without touching India?

At the banks of the Indus, Genghis Khan considered returning to Mongolia through North India and Assam, but the heat, the natural habitat and the ill portents reported by his Shaman soothsayer made him change his mind.

Genghis Khan died in 1227.

His Achievements:

His ability to innovate and transform different aspects of steppe combat into extremely effective military strategies was the most important reason behind his astounding success.

- **Organised the army:** He made great efforts to organise the army. Strict discipline was maintained in the army. He improved and restructured the army to blend the typical skills of the tribe with the army. The horse-riding skills of the Mongols and the Turks provided speed and mobility to the army. Their abilities as rapid-shooting archers from horseback were further perfected during regular hunting expeditions which doubled chance of victory over the enemies.
- **Rigorous training & preparation:** The steppe cavalry had always travelled light and moved quickly, but now it brought all its knowledge of the terrain. They carried out campaigns in the depths of winter, treating frozen rivers as highways to enemy cities and camps.. He learnt the importance of siege. His engineers prepared light portable equipment, which was used against opponents with devastating effect.

The Mongols after Genghis Khan



The Mongol expansion after Genghis Khan's death can be divided into two distinct phases -

- (i) The first which spanned the years 1236-42 when the major gains were in the Russian steppes, Bulgaria, Poland and Hungary.
- (ii) The second phase including the years 1255-1300 led to the conquest of all of China, Iran, Iraq and Syria.

The Mongol military forces met with few reversals in the decades after the 1260s the original impetus of campaigns could not be sustained in the West.

Social, Political and Military Organisation

Social Organisation

- Among the Mongols all the able-bodied, adult males of the tribe bore arms: they constituted the armed forces when the occasion demanded.
- The unification of the different Mongol tribes and subsequent campaigns against diverse people introduced new members into Genghis Khan's army. It included groups like the Turks, Chinese and Arabs who had accepted his authority willingly.
- The society included groups like the Turkic Uighurs, the defeated people like - the Kereyits. It was a body of heterogeneous mass of people.

Military Organisation

- Genghis Khan worked to systematically erase the old tribal identities of the different groups who joined his confederacy. His army was organised according to the old steppe system of decimal units. Any individual who tried to move from his allotted group without permission received harsh punishment.
- He divided the army into four units and they were required to serve under his four sons and specially chosen captains of his army units called **noyan**.
- The soldiers who had served Genghis Khan loyally through grave adversity for many years were publicly honoured some of these individuals as his 'blood brothers' and others were given special ranking as his bondsmen, a title that marked their close relationship with their master.

Political Organisation

The civil system was based on **Ulus system**. Genghis Khan assigned the responsibility of governing the newly-conquered people to his four sons. These comprised the four *ulus*.

- The eldest son, **Jochi**, received the Russian steppes and it extended as far west as his horses could roam.
- The second son, **Chaghatai**, was given the Transoxanian steppe and lands north of the Pamir Mountain adjacent to those of his brother.
- Genghis Khan had indicated that his third son, **Ogodei**, would succeed him as the Great Khan and on accession the Prince established his capital at Karakorum.
- The youngest son, **Toluy**, received the ancestral lands of Mongolia. Genghis Khan envisaged that his sons would rule the empire collectively, and to underline this point, military contingents of the individual princes were placed in each *ulus*.
- The sense of a dominion shared by the members of the family was underlined at the assembly of chieftains, **quriltais**, where all decisions relating to the family or the state for the forthcoming season campaigns, distribution of plunder, pasture lands and succession were collectively taken.

Development in Trade & communication in Mongolia

- **Yam:** Genghis Khan had already fashioned a rapid courier system called yam that connected the distant areas of his regime.
- **Qubcur tax:** For the maintenance of this communication system the Mongol nomads contributed a tenth of their herd – either horses or livestock – as provisions. This was called the qubcur tax, a levy that the nomads paid willingly for the multiple benefits that it brought.
- **Territory linking:** Once the campaigns had settled, Europe and China were territorially linked with Mongolia. Commerce and travel along the **Silk Route** reached its peak under the Mongols but, the trade route extended up to Mongolia.
- **Baj tax:** Communication and ease of travel was vital to retain the coherence of the Mongol regime and travellers were given a pass for safe conduct. Traders paid the baj tax for the same purpose, all acknowledging thereby the authority of the Mongol Khan.
- **Pressure groups:** Mongols waged their successful wars against China, Persia, Russia etc there was a strong pressure group within the Mongol leadership that advocated the massacre of all peasantry and the conversion of their fields into pasture lands.



But by the 1270s, Genghis Khan's grandson, **Qubilai Khan** appeared as the protector of the peasants and the cities.

The legal code of law - *Yasa*

- Genghis Khan promulgated *Yasa* (the code of law) at the Assembly of Mongol Chieftains (*quriltai*) of 1206. It has elaborated on the complex ways in which the memory of the Great Khan was fashioned by his successors.
- In its earliest formulation the term was written as *yasa* which meant 'law', 'decree' or 'order'. *Yasa* concern administrative regulations: the organisation of the hunt, the army and the postal system.

By the middle of the thirteenth century the Mongols had emerged as a unified people and just created the largest empire the world had ever seen. They ruled over very sophisticated urban societies, with their respective histories, cultures and laws. Although the Mongols dominated the region politically, they were a numerical minority. The one way in which they could protect their identity and distinctiveness was through a claim to a sacred law given to them by their ancestor. The ***yasa*** was in all probability a compilation of the customary traditions of the Mongol tribes but in referring to it as Genghis Khan's code of law.

Conclusion

- For the Mongols, Genghis Khan was the greatest leader of all time: he united the Mongol people. He freed them from interminable tribal wars and Chinese exploitation. He brought them prosperity, fashioned a grand transcontinental empire and restored trade routes and markets that attracted distant travelers and traders.
- Genghis Khan ruled the diverse body of people and faiths. Although the Mongol Khans themselves belonged to a variety of different faiths – Shaman, Buddhist, Christian and eventually Islam, they never let their personal beliefs dictate public policy.
- The Mongol administration was a multi-ethnic, multilingual, multi-religious regime that did not feel threatened by its pluralistic constitution.
- Today, after decades of Soviet control, the country of Mongolia is recreating its identity as an independent nation. Genghis Khan appeared as an iconic figure for the



Mongol People, mobilising memories of a great past in the forging of national identity that can carry the nation into the future.

- Comparison with the Mongol Empire.

Mongols provided ideological models for the Mughals of India.

Timur, another monarch who aspired to universal dominion, hesitated to declare himself monarch because he was not of Genghis Khanid descent.

Family tree of Genghis Khan – refer page No. - 116

Timeline : Refer to Timeline -- page no. 112 & 113

Key Words / Terms: Barbarian, yasa, Tama, Quriltais, Yam, Qubcur, Naukar, Ulus

