

Theme 5. Nomadic Empires

.(Imperial formations constructed by nomadic groups)

The Mongols under the leadership of Genghis Khan built a transcontinental empire spanning Europe and Asia during the 13th and 14th centuries.

Sources

The Mongols produced little literature on their own. So we have to rely on 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 travellers. They came from a variety of backgrounds- Buddhist, Confucian, Christian, Turkish and Muslim. Many of them produced sympathetic accounts and others hostile. The earliest narrative on Genghis Khan was The Secret History of the Mongols.

Mongols-Background

The Mongols were a diverse body of people and spoke similar languages. Some of the Mongols were pastoralists while others were hunter-gatherers. They nomadised in the steppes of Central Asia. The Mongols were divided into patrilineal lineage. The richer families owned more animals and pasture lands. Hence, they had large followers and were influential in local politics. When ever there were harsh winter or drought conditions then there were conflicts among the families over pasture lands. Predatory raids were occurred in search of livestock. Groups of families form alliance in defence or offence during these occasions. But these alliances were for a short period.

Genghis Khan's Political System(Comparison with Attila's)

The size of Genghis Khan's confederation of Mongol and Turkish tribes perhaps matched in size to that of the confederation in the fifth century by Attila. Genghis Khan's political system was different from Attila's. It was more durable as it survived its founder. It was stable enough to counter large and better equipped armies of China, Iran and Eastern Europe. They also administered complex agrarian economies and urban settlements far from their home.

The Great Wall of China

The Great Wall of China was a visual testament to the disturbance and fear that brought by the nomadic raids on the agrarian societies of north China and Central Asia.

Genghis Khan

Early Career

Genghis Khan was born in 1162 near the Onon river in the north of present day Mongolia. Originally named Temujin('blacksmith'), Genghis was the third son of the minor chieftain Yesugei.(kiyat). He was 9 when his father was assassinated by the neighbouring Tatars. He along with his brothers and step-brothers, was brought up by his mother. The next ten years were full of hardships. He was captured and enslaved at one occasion. Soon after his marriage he had to fight to recover his wife (Borte) who was kidnapped. He also formed alliances with Boghurchu, a friend; Jamuqa, his brother, and his old uncle, Ong Khan. Between 1180 and 1190, he used his alliance with Ong Khan against Jamuqa. After this he gained confidence and moved against other tribes. He defeated the Tatars, the Naimans, the Keraites etc. Finally he defeated the powerful Jamuqa in 1206. Then the assembly of Mongol chieftains (quriltai), declared Genghis Khan the Great Khan of the Mongols. He took the title Genghis Khan: 'Oceanic ruler' or Universal Ruler.

Campaigns of Genghis Khan

Genghis Khan united the Mongol people into a more effective, disciplined military force. The first of his concern was to conquer China. At this time, China was divided into three kingdoms. Chin the north, the His Hsia in the north west and the Sung in the south. By 1209, the His Hsia was defeated. The Great Wall of China was breached until 1213 and Peking sacked in 1215. 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 Mongolian homeland in 1216 and leave the military affairs of the reign to his subordinates.

Defeated Qara Khita who controlled the Tien Shan mountains Northwest of China in 1218, Mongol dominions reached the Amu Darya and the states of Transoxiana and Khwarazm. Muhammad, Shah of Khwarazm in central Asia executed Mongol ambassadors. Genghis had to respond to their execution. The Mongols destroyed cities such as Samarqand, Nishapur, Bokhara, and Herat.

Genghis Khan and India

Mongol forces in pursuit of Khwarazm Shah pushed into Azerbaijan and defeated Russian forces. Another wing followed the Shah's son, Jalaluddin, into Afghanistan and Sindh province. At the banks of the Indus, Genghis Khan considered returning to Mongolia through North India and Assam. But because of heat, natural habitat and ill omens that were reported to him by his soothsayer which made him change of his mind. Thus India escaped from the visit of Genghis Khan. He died in 1227.

Causes for the Success of Ghengis Khan

The military achievements of Genghis Khan were astounding. He had achieved all the military victory by his ability to innovate and transform various aspects of steppe combat into effective military strategies. The horse riding and hunting skills of Mongols and Turks provided speed and mobility to the army. Their abilities as rapid shooting archers from horse back were further perfected during regular hunting expeditions which doubled the chance of victory over the enemies. They carried out campaigns in the depths of winter by using frozen river as highway to enemies' cities and camps. They brought their knowledge of moving light in terrain as an effective military strategy. He learnt the importance of siege engines and naphtha bombardment quickly. His engineers built light portable equipments which he used against his opponents.

Military Organisation under the Mongols

Among the Mongols all the able-bodied, adult males of the tribe bore arms. They constituted the armed forces when the occasion demanded. The army of Genghis Khan was composed of different people which complicated the relatively small undifferentiated army into a mixed mass of people. He altered the old steppe system of decimal units system, i.e., divisions of 10s, 100s, 1,000s and 10,000 soldiers. He divided the old tribal groupings and distributed their members into new military units. No individual could move from his allotted group without permission. If they did so they were punished severely. Thus, the largest unit of soldiers (10,000 soldiers (tumen) now included different tribes and clans. The military units were to serve under his four sons and specially chosen captains of his army units called noyan. A band of followers who had served Genghis Khan loyally through grave adversity for many years also became important within the new realm.

Conferring titles

Genghis Khan conferred title of 'blood brothers' publicly to military persons. He also honoured humbler persons as bondsmen a title that indicated their close relationship with Genghis Khan. It did not preserve the rights of old clan chieftains and new aristocracy derived its status from its closeness to Genghis Khan.

Political Organisation under Genghis Khan

- Genghis Khan assigned the responsibility of governing the newly-conquered people to his four sons. These comprised the four ulus, a term that did not originally mean fixed territories.
- Genghis Khan envisaged that his sons would rule the empire collectively.
- 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**.
- 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.
- A rapid courier system connected distant areas.
- For the maintenance of this communication system the Mongol nomads contributed a tenth of their herd.
- This was called the qubcur tax, a levy that the nomads paid willingly for the multiple benefits that it brought.

Communication and Trade Under the Mongols

Courier System

Genghis Khan had formed a rapid courier system that connected the distant areas of his regime. Fresh mounts and despatch riders were placed in outposts at regularly spaced distances. The Mongol nomads contributed a tenth of their herd—either horsed or livestock—as provisions for the maintenance of this communication system. This was called the qubcur tax, a levy that the nomads paid willingly for the multiple benefits that it brought. The courier system (yam) was further refined after Genghis Khan's death and its speed and reliability surprised travellers. It enabled the Great Khan to keep a check on developments at the farthest end of their regime across the continental land army.

Trade

When peace was established after Mongol conquest (Pax Mongolica), trade connections matured. Travel and trade along silk route increased under the authority of Mongols. It continued north of Mongolia and to Karakorum. Communication and ease of travel was essential to maintain the authority of the Mongol regime. Travellers were given a pass (paiza in Persian; gerege in Mongolian) for safe conduct. Traders paid by tax for the same purpose, there by acknowledging the Mongol authority.

Administrative features of Genghis Khan's Rule

During the reign of Genghis Khan, civil administrators were recruited from the conquered lands. But they were deployed in distant areas. Chinese Secretaries were posted in Iran, and Persians in China. These administrators retained the confidence of their masters till the time they continued to increase the revenues for them. These administrators could sometimes command considerable influence.

Yasa(Legal code of Genghis Khan)

It is believed that Yasa was officially proclaimed by Genghis Khan at the Quariltai of 1206. In its earliest formulation, the term was written as 'yasaq' which meant 'law', 'decree' or 'order'. By the middle of the thirteenth century, Mongols started using the term yasa in a more general sense to mean the 'legal code of Genghis Khan'. The yasa was most probably a compilation of the customary traditions of the Mongol tribes. The yasa served to join together the Mongol people around a body of shared beliefs. It recognised the affinity to Genghis Khan and descendants and, even as they absorbed different aspects of sedentary life style, it gave them the confidence to retain their ethnic identity and impose their 'law' upon their defeated subjects. It was an extremely empowering ideology inspired by Genghis Khan's vision and was vital in the construction of a Mongol universal dominion.

Situating Genghis Khan and the Mongols in World History

Genghis Khan is remembered in the history as a conqueror, destroyer of cities and a person responsible for the death of thousands of people. But for the Mongols, Genghis Khan was the greatest leader of all time. He united the Mongol people, freed them from wars, brought them prosperity and restored trade routes and markets.

Mongols were a diverse body of people. In spite of their own faith in Buddhism, Christianity, Islam etc. the Mongol rulers never allowed their personal beliefs to dictate the public policy. They recruited administrators and armed contingents from various conquered lands. All this was unusual for the time when they were ruling. Mongols provided ideological models for the Mughals of India. Timur, another monarch who aspired to universal dominion, hesitated to declare himself monarch because of Genghis Khan.

After decades of Soviet control, the country of Mongolia is recreating its identity as an independent nation. Genghis Khan has appeared as an iconic figure for the Mongol people, mobilising memories of a great past in the foraging of national identity that can carry the nation into future.

Key Words

- **Barbarians:** The term barbarian is derived from the Greek barbaros which meant a non-Greek, someone whose language sounded like a random noise: 'barbar'. Cruel, greedy and politically unable to govern.
- **Yasa:** Genghis Khan's code of law
- **Tama:** The military contingents of the individual princes
- **Quriltais:** The assembly of chieftains where all decisions relating to the family or the state-campaigns, distribution of plunder, pasture lands and succession - were collectively taken.
- **Anda:** Blood brothers of Genghis Khan.
- **Naukar:** Special ranking as his bondsmen, a title that marked their close relationship with their masters.
- **Qanats:** Underground canals
- **Yam:** A courier system introduced by Genghis Khan
- **Qubcur Tax:** A levy that few the nomads paid willingly for the multiple benefits that it brought.