

## India & Mongolia in the Middle Ages – More Than Just a Connection



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### The Taj Mahal

If there is one monument which conjures up an image of India, it is the Taj Mahal. It was constructed c. 1631 at the behest of Emperor Shah Jahan as the ultimate memorial and place of eternal rest for his beloved wife, Mumtaz. The Taj, as it is commonly referred to, is for romanticists across the globe, the ultimate architectural poem of love etched in white marble with floral motifs inlaid with precious stones; a monument of perfect geometrical balance and symmetry. In this mausoleum lie the tombs of Emperor Shah Jahan and his beloved queen.

It may come as a surprise to many that this widely admired, loved and romanticized world artefact which has come to be known as a symbol of India includes an ethnic Mongolian lineage, among several others. For Emperor Shah Jahan's great-grandfather's grandmother was supposed to have a blood line which, through her father, traced back to the Mongol emperor Genghis Khan, who lived about 450 years before Shah Jahan.

Shah Jahan was the fifth emperor of the Mughal dynasty which started ruling from Delhi in 1526 with the ascent of his grandfather's grandfather, Babur, to the peacock throne. At its peak, the Mughal Empire had a vast part of South Asia in its control, including large areas of present-day Afghanistan, Pakistan, India and Bangladesh.

### Emperor Babur

Babur was born in 1483 in the Fergana valley of present-day Uzbekistan. His father, Umar Sheikh Mirza, was lord of the Fergana

area and traced his lineage to a line of Turkic-Mongol warlords who alternately plagued, plundered, ruled and governed in greater or lesser components a vast region which roughly spans the areas of present-day Turkey, southern Russia, the northern Middle East, central Asia, northern Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan and northern India. The most commonly known name in this lineage was Tamerlane, born in 1336 in central Asia, also known as Timur the lame, Timur the Great or Timur the Horrible, depending on which perspective one took – that of his huge territorial conquests or the countless and endless massacres and lootings which formed the basis of them. Babur chose the former perspective and with pride considered himself a Timurid, a descendant of the mighty Timur.

Babur's mother was Qutlugh Nigar Khanum. The word “khan” means lord or king in Mongolian and Khanum in Mongolian means the great princess, the daughter of a great khan. Her father, Yunus Khan, was sporadically the khan of parts of an area referred to in the Persian language as Moghulistan, a Mongol kingdom or group of fiefdoms which lasted for about 300 years between the 14th and 17th centuries. Moghulistan (Photo 1) geographically is roughly an area which in today's world comprises the Uyghur region of western China and the central Asian republics of Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and eastern Uzbekistan. With countless inter-marriages and internecine marriages which were further complicated by a plethora of wives and concubines in the ruling Turkic-Mongol milieu across a huge swath of Asia, the Khanate of Moghulistan may have been born out of the aspirations of warlords who considered themselves of somewhat purer Mongol stock than their Turkic half-brothers. To learned Persian eyes, they were more Mongol than Turkic and in Persian, which was the *lingua franca* of the cultured and educated of those times, the rulers of Moghulistan were called Moghul, the Persian term for Mongol. This ultimately came to be referred to as Mughal in English, which having become the *lingua franca* of modern times became a nomenclature which has continued ever since while referring to the Mughal Empire of India. The khans of Moghulistan claimed direct descent from one of the most known names in medieval Asian history, Genghis Khan.

### Genghis Khan

Genghis Khan was born c. 1162 with the name Temujin, in the northeastern region of present-day Mongolia. He was born into the Borjigin tribe, one of the numerous nomadic horse-borne warring tribes that constituted the then population of the region. With craft,

Photo 1: Wikimedia Commons



Moghulistan (1490)

strategy and horrific ruthlessness, Genghis Khan founded an empire around 1206 which even after his death c.1227 grew like an amoeba and at its peak in around 1279 covered a land area on the planet which to this day is the second-largest of an empire in recorded history. It was a contiguous land mass entirely encompassing the great steppes which stretch across present day Mongolia, southern Russia, western China and central Asia.

The empire through persistent and bloody invasions, enlarged well beyond the steppes of the native nomadic tribes, in the eastern end into the developed civilizations of Korea, China and the northern parts of southeast Asia, in the south to encompass Tibet, towards the southwest into the whole or parts of present-day south Asia, Persia, Mesopotamia and Turkey, and in the west across the Caucasus and eastern Europe, all the way to present-day Hungary.

On the positive side, the Silk Road, along with the trade and exchange of cultures that the Silk Road manifested, reached its peak at the height of the consolidated Mongol Empire (Photo 2). In stark contrast to many other empire builders, the Mongol Empire (at least the original eastern part of it) was apparently tolerant and even highly encouraging of multi-religious pursuits and cultures. Original Mongol Shamanism-Tengrism based upon the worship of the sky, nature and ancestors co-existed with numerous other prevailing and new schools of religious thought including Nestorianism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, Christianity and Islam.

### The Khanates of Asia

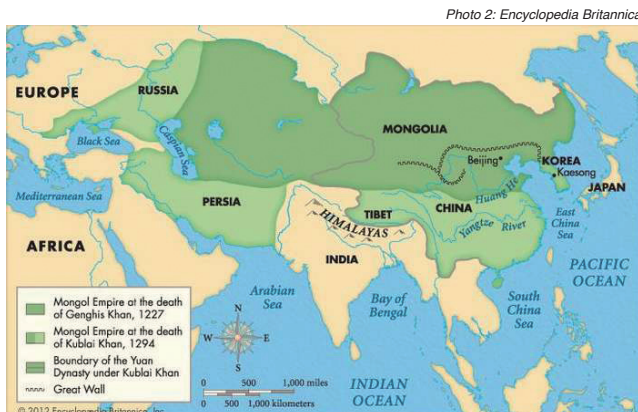
To be able to effectively govern such a vast diverse land mass, Genghis Khan divided the jurisdiction across his four principal sons, Jochi, Ogedei, Tolui and Chagatai. It was the Chagatai division that had control over a region which was immediately west of the

empire's eastern Mongol-Chinese bulkhead. It became known as the Chagatai Khanate. Moghulistan, or the eastern Chagatai Khanate, was a later formation that branched out of the original Chagatai Khanate. Around the 13th century, the two southwestern Khanates adopted Islam as the main religion.

With such clear Mongol ancestry leading back to the legendary Genghis Khan, one would have expected Babur to be in raptures about this linkage. However, most accounts indicate that he was more intent on gloating over his paternal Turkic lineage. Going southeast into the hot plains of India from the cool valley of Fergana was probably not his ideal choice for creating an empire, but more likely he was forced into it by circumstances. He ultimately became the loser in the terrible internecine battles that were happening for control of his beloved Fergana valley, leaving the southeast path as his only warring option. In this option, Babur came out on top, defeating his half brethren who were in power 1,000 kilometers away in the Delhi Sultanate. The great Indian sub-continent became Babur's unlikely home and that of his descendants. Babur was never to see Fergana again. He died in 1530 in Agra in India, 200 km south of Delhi. As per his wishes, his remains were relocated to Kabul where his tomb lies and this was the closest to Fergana that he could get. Agra would become famous a century later thanks to his illustrious grandson, Akbar, and well into the modern day, due to the Taj Mahal.

### Emperor Akbar

Among the better remembered monarchs of India stands Akbar (Photo 3). He was born in 1542 in Umerkot in present-day Pakistan



The extent of the Mongol Empire at various points in history



Emperor Akbar



to Emperor Humayun and Queen Hamida (also known as Miryam-Makani), a Persian lady. At the age of 14, Akbar ascended to the throne of Delhi after the death of Humayun. Emperor Akbar is known to have taken a radically different approach to the myriad languages, religions and cultures that dominated the Indian landscape. He is said to have abolished discrimination based on religion and had many ancient Hindu Sanskrit scriptures translated into Persian. He himself enjoyed diverse literature and promoted these. He established a new capital near Agra and here he invited scholars of all religions and bards of different languages and cultural streams. Religious discourses, exchange of ideas, poetry, music and dance flourished. If one is to trace ancestral connectivity, Akbar's Mongol heritage of promoting diverse religions and art forms seems to have been far more dominant than his Timurid lineage which by many accounts had very little to say for cultural and religious tolerance.

The Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage (INTACH) is a non-governmental organization based in New Delhi ([www.intach.org](http://www.intach.org)). INTACH conducts research into lesser known aspects of history relating to India. An interesting account of Akbar was given to me by Swapna Liddle, the convenor of INTACH's Delhi Chapter and an eminent historian. Akbar is said to have had a divine birth much in the same manner as his Mongol ancestor Genghis Khan, in the Mongolian legend of the Divine mother Alanqua. The quote is from a text on "Mongols to Mughals" (<https://blogs.bl.uk/asian-and-african/2013/02/from-mongols-to-mughals.html>) which in turn refers to the "Akbarnama", the biography of Emperor Akbar.

*The mythical heroine Alan Qo'a, who, impregnated by a ray of divine light, gave birth to the Mughals' ancestors. Abu'l-Fazl, Akbar's official biographer, devotes a whole chapter to her, describing the day of her conception as "the beginning of the manifestation of his Majesty, the king of kings, who after passing through divers stages was revealed to the world from the holy womb of her Majesty Miryam-makānī for the accomplishment of things visible and invisible. (Akbarnama, Vol. 1)*

### Mughal Imperial Women

In the traditions of the Mongol Empire, it is said that women held considerable power. Genghis Khan made his daughters military generals and they wielded considerable authority. His principal wife, Boerte, is said to have played a significant role in his life. Daughter-in-law Torgene became the ruling empress (*Khatun*) of the eastern Mongol-Chinese Khanate upon the death of her husband, Ogedei. In his book, *The Secret History of the Mongol Queens: How the Daughters of Genghis Khan Rescued His Empire* (2010), eminent ethnographer and expert on the Mongols, Jack Weatherford,

explores at length the legacy of the Mongol queens. The power traditionally wielded by Mongol women may have naturally influenced the Mughal emperors of India for it does seem that, in general contrast to the backstage to which their distant sisters in the middle-east were relegated, Mughal ladies of India were visible and evident. Delhi-based writer and Cambridge scholar Ira Mukhoty, in her recent book *Daughters of the Sun* (2018), explores the fascinating lives of the Mughal imperial women and the enormous ways in which they influenced the empire. An example is Shah Jahan's daughter, Jahanara Begum, who is said to have had a great impact on the architecture of her father's capital, Shahjahanabad (also known today as Old Delhi), and even conducted a flourishing business owning a trading ship that was based in the port of Surat on the west coast of India. Mughal women were well-educated, intelligent and highly-accomplished and Mukhoty states that their often being portrayed simply as behind-the-scenes indolent beneficiaries of a lavish lifestyle is completely mistaken.

### The Shatakona

Mughal architecture in its ultimate style of amalgamating various art and architectural forms appears to have reached its pinnacle during the 100 years or so across the reigns of Akbar and his grandson, Shah Jahan. The cloud and sky motif which was a foundation of Mongol art form, common to Mongolia and Tibet, appears in artwork in the Diwan-e-khaz Hall in the Red Fort in Delhi (*Photo 4*). A motif which appears on the tomb of Akbar's father,

Photo 4: Swapna Liddle, INTACH, New Delhi



Mughal artwork in the Red Fort, Delhi

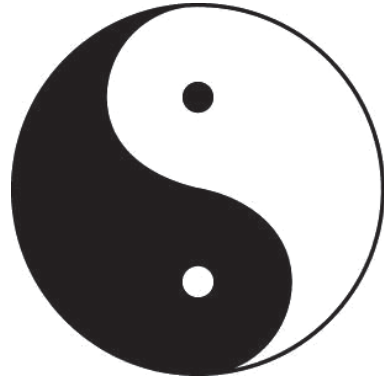
Photo 5: Narayanaoracle.com Copyright 2019 Narayana Oracle



The Shatakona



Photo 6: Ancient History Encyclopedia. Original image by Dan Carter. Creative Commons



Yin-Yang symbol

Emperor Humayun, in New Delhi, would surprise many. It is the six-pronged Star of David. While it is common knowledge that the Star of David is closely associated with the Jewish tradition, it is also an important symbol in Hinduism and other eastern traditions. It is known as the Shatakona (*Sanskrit: Shata = six, Kona = points*), a symbol of the Universal Cosmic Energy of Shiva-Shakti, the male and female cosmic energies. In the Mongol tradition, these cosmic energies are represented by the Yin-Yang symbol, the two complementary waveforms which make a full circle (Photo 5). Of course, it is not possible to attribute or pinpoint the presence of the star on Emperor Humayun's tomb to a specific tradition, but the commonality that such a symbol has across different Asian traditions and of Akbar commissioning it as a symbol upon his father's memorial presents food for thought.

The complementary waveforms are in Buddhist tradition considered to be divine golden fish (Photo 6). This line of thought brings in its wake the possibility of yet another interesting connection, for during Shah Jahan's time the highest award bestowed by the Mughal emperor was a fish made of gold, known as the Mahi-Maratib. Could this have been adopted due to its importance in Mongol tradition? The fish is also an important symbol in Hinduism and Christianity, so one is left once again with the inability to specify a confirmed connection but can appreciate and ponder the possibilities.

## Mongol Invasions

About 300 years before Babur arrived in Delhi, his direct maternal ancestors had tried to attack the Turkic Delhi Sultanate. Attempts were made in the 13th and early 14th centuries during the reign of the Khaljis and there were sieges of Delhi that lasted days. However, the invasions were ultimately repulsed and there were Mongol

soldiers who converted to Islam and stayed back in Delhi. According to an article published in 1996 on Mongolia and India in the *Mongolian Journal of International Affairs*, the author Y. Nyamdavaa states that the invading Mongol general Alghu, who was a grandson of Genghis Khan, converted to Islam and married the Delhi Sultan's daughter. Alghu's men were settled in areas around Delhi. The radically hot climatic conditions being unbearable compared to their native steppes, some of them left for their own land, while the remaining Mongols became known as the new Muslims. However, the settlers were kept in abject poverty and faced a bleak future. Eventually they were thought to be a danger to the State and a conspiracy among them was suspected, so the Sultan commanded that all new Muslims, 30,000-40,000 of them, be killed. To this day, there is an area in New Delhi known as Mongolpur which is said to have existed from medieval times and may have been the original location of the small community of Mongols.

About 2,000 km east of Delhi lies today the border between India and Myanmar. Back in the 13th century, around the time the Mongol Chagatai Khanate was invading Delhi in the west through central Asia and Kashmir, the Mongol-Yuan kingdom was attacking Myanmar. There is a possibility that, as in Delhi, some Mongols stayed back. Traversing the jungles and heavily forested hills that lie across Myanmar and northeastern India, they settled down to a more sedentary lifestyle than their nomadic upbringing. Y. Nyamdavaa draws attention to the fact that the sound of the *pena*, a musical instrument in India's far-eastern state of Manipur bordering Myanmar, is very similar to the Mongolian *morin khuur* (the horse-head fiddle).

### The Deepest Connection

However, rather than invasions and wars, the deepest and most significant of the ancient contacts between India and Mongolia relate to religion and culture. With reference to Y. Nyamdavaa in the *Mongolian Journal of International Affairs*, Buddhism from India arrived in Mongolia via Central Asia, Tibet and China. The eminent Kashmiri Buddhist scholar Vairochana built the first monastery in Khotan in Central Asia and as Buddhism spread it came to the notice of the Xiongnu, an ancient Mongolian tribe who had direct relations with the region. Over the years, Mongolian monks undertook the arduous journey to India through the vast steppes, deserts and across the Himalayas to study at Nalanda in ancient India. While the later Turko-Afghan invasions into India destroyed these centers of learning, in Mongolia and China, the Great Khan Ogedei built Buddhist monasteries and a big temple in the city of Karakorum (located in the northern part of the Orkhon river valley, about 400 km west of the present day Mongolian capital of Ulaanbaatar) which had earlier in 1220 been proclaimed by his father, Genghis Khan, as the capital of the Mongol Empire.

After Ogedei Khan, Monk Khan further strengthened the religious and cultural ties between Mongolia and India. He appointed the Kashmiri monk Namu to the newly created position of "State Teacher" for which he used the Sanskrit word *Guru*. Iphtikhir-Eddin Muhammed, a Persian scholar and tutor to Monk Khan, translated the tale of *Kalila and Dimna* of the Indian *Panchtantra* (original language Sanskrit) from Persian into Mongolian and is said to have assigned it as reading to Monk Khan.

Buddhist influence and related ties to Indian culture reached a high point during the long reign of Kublai Khan (ruled 1260-1294). Sonam Gara, a famous translator, translated the philosophical and moral treatise originally in Sanskrit, *Subhasitaratnanidhi*, from Tibetan to Mongolian. Considerable work appears to have been done in the medieval ages to disseminate information on Buddhism and about ancient India, with significant efforts to translate from Sanskrit into Tibetan and Uyghur and ultimately into the Mongol language. By the beginning of the 14th century all the principal works on Buddhism had been translated and printed. Choji Odzer, a Mongolian scholar, philosopher and poet, in addition to translating the scriptures, provided his own commentaries.

Finally, during the reign of the last Mongol Great Khan, Ligdan (ruled 1604-1634), the largest single translation project of the period was undertaken with the creation of the Mongolian *Ganjur* and *Danjur*. These treatises consisted of 333 large volumes of translations from several Indian languages. These were first translated into Tibetan and then into Mongolian. The *Ganjur* is attributed to the Buddha while the *Danjur* is a collection of thousands

Photo 7: Wikimedia Commons



The Soyombo

of works by other Indian pundits and saints. The Mongolian *Danjur* is said to be even more elaborate than its Tibetan counterpart as it includes many Indian texts, translated both from Sanskrit and Chinese, that are not present in the Tibetan *Danjur*.

### The Soyombo

In 1686, the Mongol saint and scholar Zanabazar created the Soyombo script. The name itself is a modification of the Sanskrit word *Svayambhu*, meaning "That which is created by Itself". The script is derived from Sanskrit's Devanagari script and Tibetan. Additional symbols and markings were included by Zanabazar to make it more suitable for the Mongolian Khalkha dialect. The Soyombo script is used for religious purposes in Mongolia even today and is held in deep esteem. The most significant element in the script is the Soyombo symbol ([Photo 7](#)). It is the national emblem of Mongolia and is on the national flag. The components of the Soyombo symbol include the *Yin-Yang* and the Sanskrit *Om*, representing the primordial sound of the creation, a concept central to the ancient spiritual traditions of India.

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