

Reshaping India's Political Map

The period in this chapter and the next is often called the latter part of the 'medieval period' of Indian history. The term 'medieval' (i.e., 'between two ages') was originally applied to European history, roughly from the fall of the Roman Empire (5th century CE) to the Renaissance (Europe's cultural revival in the 14th–16th centuries, nurtured by the rediscovery of Greek and Roman art and literature).

A new era in India's journey began in the early 11th century. Invasions from beyond the Hindu Kush mountains reshaped India's political map. No doubt, India had seen much warfare in earlier periods, but the spate of invasions by people from outside the Indian subcontinent during this period was unprecedented. Many of these invaders were Central Asian-Turkic or Afghan. They were drawn to India not only for her reputed riches and for territorial ambitions, but also often to spread, by force of violence if necessary, their own versions of their religion.

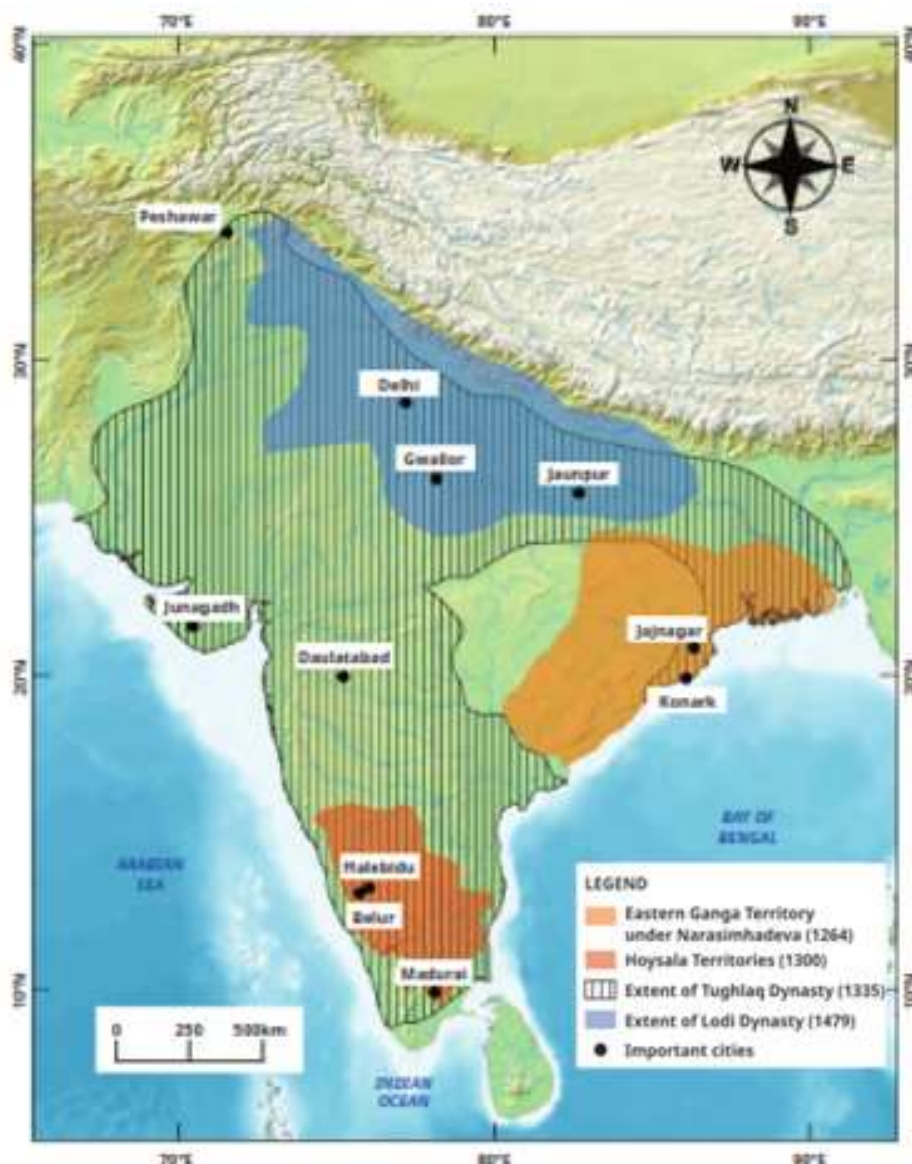


Fig. A comparison of the territories under the Tughlaqs and the Lodis (13th to 15th centuries), and regional powers in the south and east.

Rise and Fall of the Delhi Sultanate

We begin our journey here with the Delhi Sultanate, formed after the defeat in 1192 of King Prithviraj Chauhan, who ruled over parts of northwestern India. This Sultanate saw the rule of five successive foreign dynasties of Turkic-Afghan origin the Mamluks (or 'Slave dynasty'), the Khiljis (or Khaljis), the Tughlaqs, the Sayyids, and the Lodis (or Lodhis). While certain parts of northern India came under the control of the Delhi Sultanate, neighbouring kingdoms, such as the Eastern Gangas in the east and the Hoysalas in the south resisted its advance and also emerged as thriving centres of art, culture, and administration. The city of Delhi also assumed a bigger role in the political landscape of northern India.

The Sultanate period was marked by political instability combined with efforts at territorial expansion. This resulted in military campaigns that raided villages and cities, and plundered and destroyed temples and seats of learning. Successions (the appointments of new sultans) were often violent: almost two sultans out of three seized power by eliminating their predecessor, so that a sultan's average reign was hardly more than nine years!



Fig. A coin minted by Ala-ud-din Khilji, which bears the inscription 'Sikander Sani' or 'the second Alexander' in Persian.

At the turn of the 14th century, Ala-ud-din Khilji conducted military campaigns over large areas of north and central India, sacking and plundering many cities; at the same time, he also repelled several invasions by Mongol forces, who were trying to add India to the vast Mongol Empire (it covered most of Asia at the time).

His slave-general Malik Kafur expanded the Sultanate's reach southward, conquering several kingdoms on the way; their plundered wealth helped finance the Sultanate's enormous military apparatus. He also attacked a number of Hindu centres such as Srirangam, Madurai, Chidambaram, and possibly Rameswaram.

A few decades later, Muhammad bin Tughlaq (or 'Tughluq') ruled Delhi and expanded the Delhi Sultanate's territories further. For the first time since the Mauryan Empire, most of the Subcontinent was now under one ruler. Although this dominance was significant, it proved to be short-lived. Muhammad bin Tughlaq had ambitious schemes, but they were often poorly executed.

1. One such was moving his capital from Delhi to Daulatabad (then called 'Devagiri', near present-day Sambhaji Nagar); perhaps he thought its more central location would offer better control of the empire. The people were forced to travel over 1,000 km, and a few years later, as his plan misfired, he shifted the capital back to Delhi; both transfers resulted in great loss of life according to some sources.
2. Another instance was the introduction of 'token currency', where cheap copper coins were declared to be tokens and have the value of silver or gold coins-although this was a progressive idea (most of our currency today is actually 'token'), at the time this created confusion in the trade and encouraged people to counterfeit copper coins, all of which caused the economy to decline.
3. The sultans and their court elite lived in luxurious palaces, enjoying elaborate clothing, jewelled ornaments and fine food. This wealth was largely derived from plunder from their military campaigns, taxes levied on common people and conquered regions, and engagement in slave trade.
4. This period also witnessed numerous attacks on sacred or revered images in Buddhist, Jain and Hindu temples; such destruction was motivated not just by plunder but also by iconoclasm.
5. Some of the sultans also imposed the jizya, a tax on non-Muslim subjects to grant them protection and exemption from military service. In practice, depending on the ruler, this discriminatory tax would be a source of economic burden and public humiliation, and formed a financial and social incentive for subjects to convert to Islam.
6. At the end of the 14th century, Timur, a brutal Turkic-Mongol conqueror from central Asia, invaded northwest India and launched a devastating attack on Delhi, then a thriving city. As he wrote in his memoirs, his two-fold objective was to wage "war with the infidels and to gain something by plundering the wealth of the infidels."

Resistance to the Delhi Sultanate

Throughout its rule, the Delhi Sultanate faced resistance from many quarters. While many kingdoms fell into its net, it failed to subdue the Eastern Ganga kingdom (see Fig.) of Kalinga, which included present-day Odisha and parts of Bengal and Andhra Pradesh. One of its rulers in the mid-13th century, Narasimhadeva I (also spelt Narasingha Deva I), was noted for the military strength and cultural brilliance he brought to the kingdom. Apart from repelling multiple inroads of the Sultanate, he defeated the

Delhi Sultanate's governor of Bengal. Partly to commemorate these victories, he built the famed Sūrya temple at Konark (present-day Odisha).



Fig. A statue depicting Narasimhadeva I seated on his throne, surrounded by attendants and musicians.

THINK ABOUT IT

During the time of the Tughlaqs, the Musunuri Nayakas, Telugu chieftains, rallied over 75 more chieftains of the region, formed a confederacy that defeated smaller provinces, formed a confederacy that defeated the Delhi Sultanate forces, and expelled Muhammad bin Tughlaq's army from Warangal (present-day Telangana) around 1330-1336. Do you think it would have been an easy task to bring together 75 leaders in those days?

Ala-ud-din's push to the South, attracted by its renowned wealth. At the time, the Hoysalas ruled parts of southern India (mostly present-day Karnataka) and fended off several attacks from the Delhi Sultanate, remaining the only independent kingdom in the south. However, weakened by these attacks and internal conflicts, the Hoysala kingdom declined and, in the mid-14th century, was absorbed into the Vijaya nagara Empire further south



Fig. The Hoysalas built magnificent temples, for instance those of Belur (this picture) and Halebidu.

The Delhi Sultanate also faced rebellions from the emergence of several independent regional Sultanates. The Bahmani Sultanate, for instance, rose in the mid-14th century and controlled much of the Deccan for a while. Powerful Sultanates also emerged in Gujarat, Bengal and other regions, leading to a complex interplay of alliances-and frequent wars. Parts of Rajasthan also remained beyond the reach of the Delhi Sultanate; in the 15th century, it faced stiff resistance from Rana Kumbha, the ruler of the Mewar kingdom, who also successfully repelled invasions from these later sultanates.



Fig. A view of the Kumbhalgarh Fort in the Aravalli hills

Kumbhalgarh Fort was built by Rana Kumbha in the 15th century in the Aravalli hills and served as a stronghold for the rulers of Mewar, a prominent Rajput kingdom (in the central and southern parts of today's Rajasthan). Surrounded by forests and steep slopes, it is famous for its massive 36-kilometre-long wall, one of the longest continuous walls in the world.

The Vijayanagara Empire

While the Delhi Sultanate grew politically more unstable, a new centre of power emerged in the south. In the 14th century, two brothers, Harihara and Bukka, who had initially served as governors under Muhammad bin Tughlaq, eventually rejected Delhi's authority, and established an independent kingdom that became a significant force in southern India and grew into the Vijayanagara Empire.

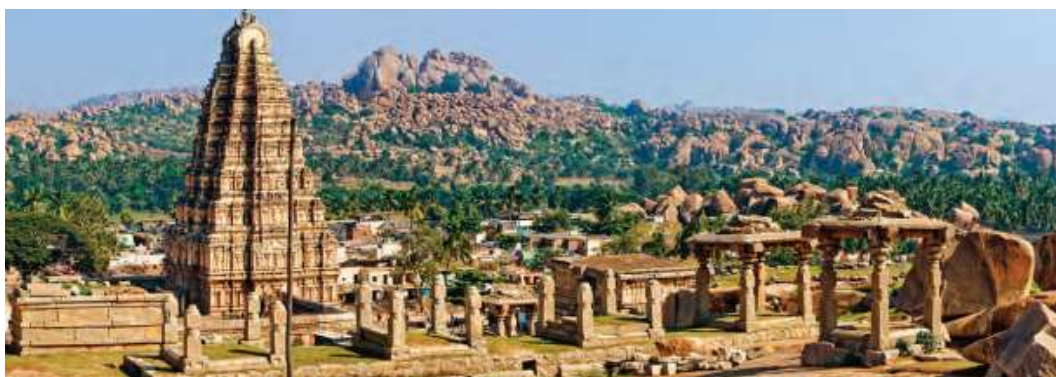


Fig. A section of the ruins of Vijayanagara city (present-day Hampi).

The large building is the Virupaksha temple.

To the north of the Vijayanagara Empire (see Fig.), the Bahmani Sultanate was a major rival; it eventually fragmented into five independent states called the 'Deccan Sultanates'-Bijapur, Golconda, Berar, Ahmednagar, and Bidar-each ruled by former governors or tarafdars who declared autonomy. The Vijayanagara rulers battled with the first two, as well as with the Gajapati rulers of Odisha in the east.

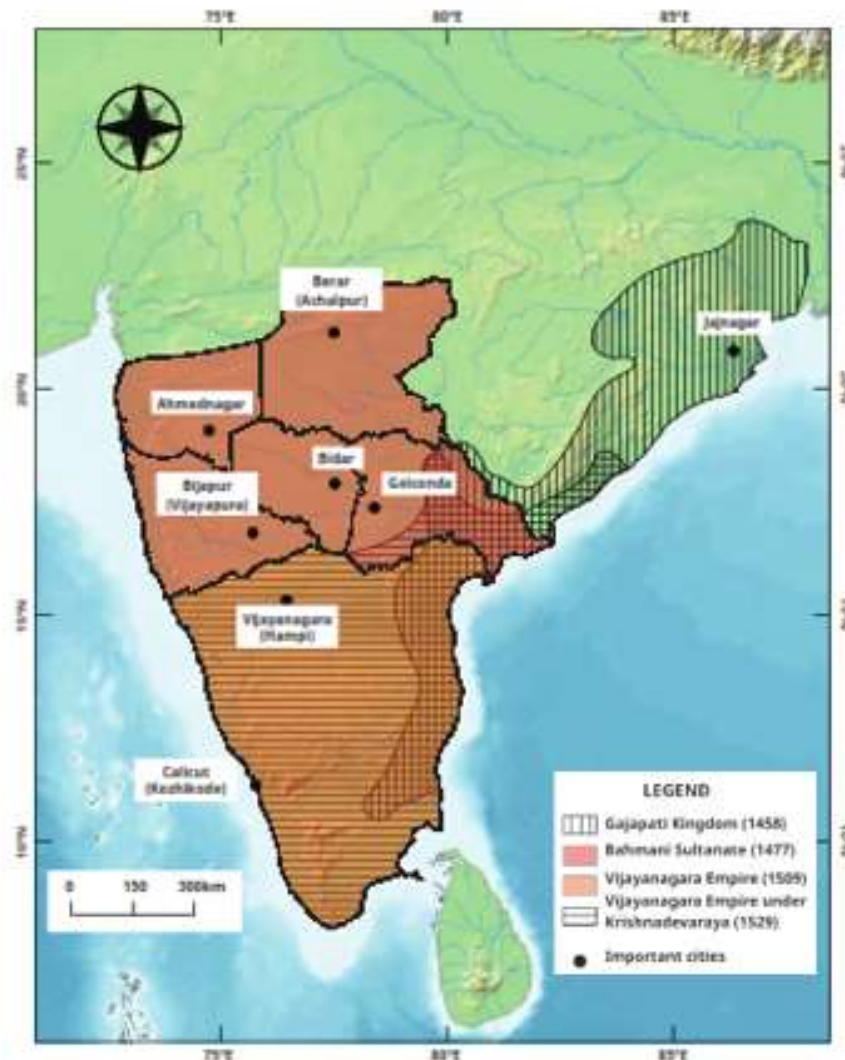


Fig. Kingdoms in the Deccan and the Vijayanagar Empire

Krishnadevaraya

In the 16th century, the Vijayanagara Empire reached its peak under its celebrated ruler, Krishnadevaraya, who expanded and secured the empire's dominance over the Deccan. Under his rule, the empire achieved both military power and cultural renaissance. He patronised poets and scholars in Sanskrit, Telugu and Kannada; he himself composed an epic poem in Telugu, Amuktamalyada, on the story of the Tamil poet-saint Andal; one section of the work is a Rajaniti ('royal policy') where he expounded his ideas of good governance. Krishnadevaraya provided grants to many temples, including Tirupati in Andhra Pradesh and the Vitthala temple in his own capital Vijayanagara, which displayed many grand temples, palaces and other buildings.

After winning many wars against his neighbours, Krishnadevaraya died of illness in 1529. In 1565, the Deccan Sultanates formed a coalition and defeated the Vijayanagara forces led by Ramaraya, Krishnadevaraya's son-in-law, at the Battle of Talikota. The city was sacked over several months; houses, shops, buildings, palaces and most of its temples were destroyed, and much of its civilian population massacred; it was left in ruins. After this, the empire got fragmented into smaller regions ruled by Nayakas, who were former military governors; the empire came to an end in the mid-17th century.

The Mughals

While the Delhi Sultanate weakened, Babur, a Turkic Mongol ruler and military strategist who, having been thrown out of Samarkand (modern-day Uzbekistan), turned his sights to India. A descendant of Timur, Babur defeated Ibrahim Lodi at Panipat in 1526, which will later be called the 'First Battle of Panipat'; it relied heavily on gunpowder, field artillery, and matchlock guns, which had recently been introduced in warfare in India. That defeat put a final end to the Delhi Sultanate and laid the foundation of the Mughal Empire, as Babur assumed control of the Delhi throne.

After Babur's death in 1530, his son Humayun struggled to hold the empire together. Taking advantage of this, Sher Shah Suri, a powerful Afghan leader, established the Sur Empire over large parts of north India and introduced many lasting reforms; the empire was short-lived, however, as Humayun soon reconquered the lost ground.

Before this happened, Himu (or Hemu), a skilled military commander and chief minister ('wazir') under one of the last Suri rulers, captured Delhi and ruled it briefly under the royal name of Hemchandra Vikramaditya. Though enjoying some military successes, he was injured on the battlefield (the Second Battle of Panipat) when confronted by Babur's grandson, Akbar. Captured, Himu was brought to Akbar, who had him beheaded. Akbar soon reclaimed Delhi for the Mughals.

Akbar

Declared emperor at the age of 13 upon his father Humayun's accidental death, Akbar set out to bring the entire Subcontinent under Mughal control; his reign was a blend of brutality and tolerance, shaped by ambition and strategy.

In early conquests, following many of his predecessors' examples, he showed no mercy at the fort Chittor or Chittorgarh, in Rajasthan), which he besieged for more than five months in the face of determined resistance from the Rajput soldiers. They inflicted heavy losses on the Mughal army, but, the fort finally breached, died fighting in large numbers, while hundreds of women committed Jauhar.

What is jauhar?

When invading Turkic or Mughal armies conquered a territory, they often took the women as slaves or abused them. There are historical examples of Rajput women jumping into mass fires to avoid being captured and enslaved; this jauhar was considered a heroic act of final resistance and a means of preserving one's honour. Thus, when Akbar finally broke into the Chittorgarh Fort, hundreds of Rajput women, led by their queens and noblewomen, committed jauhar.

Akbar ordered the massacre of some 30,000 civilians, and the surviving women and children were enslaved. Akbar was 25 at the time, and he sent a message of victory which read, "We have succeeded in occupying a number of forts and towns belonging to the infidels and have established Islam there. With the help of our bloodthirsty sword, we have erased the signs of infidelity from their minds and have destroyed temples in those places and also all over Hindustan."

His long reign lasted almost 50 years (1556 to his death in 1605); while its middle period was relatively peaceful, the final 15 years involved fresh military campaigns in Kashmir, Sindh, the Deccan, and Afghanistan.

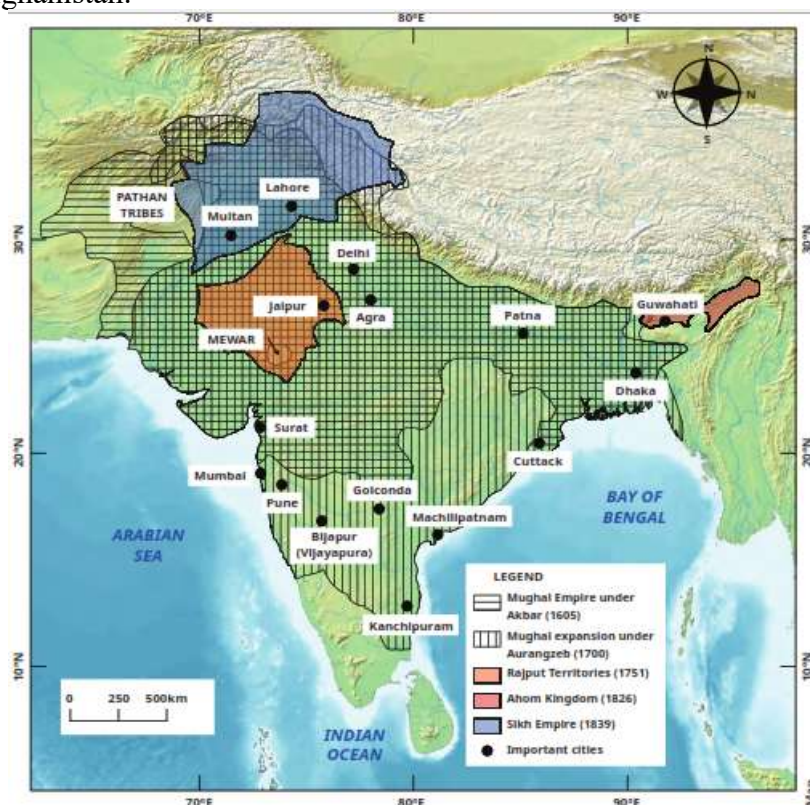


Fig. The Mughals and the rise of regional powers at different periods.

Akbar's son Jahangir shared with his father a love for art and architecture and tried to expand the empire into the Deccan. His son Shah Jahan fought several rebellions and is best remembered as the builder of the Taj Mahal at Agra. The Taj Mahal is even today recognized as one of the great architectural marvels of the world. This period formed the peak of an immense flowering of art and architecture, which included the building of Humayun's tomb in Delhi and the Red Forts in Delhi and Agra. Other classical arts and music of India also flourished during this period, as also remarkable works of calligraphy and miniature painting.

Aurangzeb

We mentioned earlier the frequent violent successions during the Sultanate period; this was repeated during the succession of Shah Jahan, who fell ill in 1657. He wished the throne to go to Dara Shikoh, his eldest son, but Dara's younger brother Aurangzeb defeated him in a series of battles and eventually executed him, presenting his severed head to their father. Aurangzeb also removed his two other brothers—he had one arrested and executed, and drove the second into exile. To prevent further challenge to his rule, Aurangzeb imprisoned his father Shah Jahan in the Agra Fort, where he remained until his death. Aurangzeb crowned himself emperor in 1658 and named himself 'Alamgir' or 'conqueror of the world'; he ruled for almost 49 years.

Aurangzeb, skilled in military matters, conducted many campaigns, conquering parts of the South in particular. Under his reign the Mughal empire reached its greatest expansion, though constantly faced with significant rebellions, some of which we will turn to in the next section. Aurangzeb had to spend the last 25 years of his life fighting war after war in the Deccan. Maintaining large armies for those campaigns depleted the empire's treasury and put a great strain on the administration; indeed, this is often considered one of key factors in the rapid decline of Mughal power after Aurangzeb's death in 1707.

Aurangzeb, who belonged to Islam's Sunni sect, was deeply religious; he led an austere life, and, unlike Akbar, observed all religious rituals and occasions. He gradually banned practices he regarded as un-Islamic, such as music and dance in his court, and reimposed the jizya tax on non-Muslims as well as a pilgrimage tax on Hindus travelling to their sacred places (both of which had been abolished by Akbar).



Fig. Aurangzeb in court, holding a hawk, with one of his sons standing in front of him (17th-century painting).

Resistance to the Mughals

Over the centuries, many peasant communities rebelled against harsh exploitation. One such case, in the 17th century, involves the Jat peasantry (in present-day western Uttar Pradesh, Haryana and eastern Rajasthan), who managed to kill an oppressive officer of the Mughal administration. In a subsequent battle, 20,000 men confronted the Mughal army and fought valiantly, but their Jat leader was killed and the rebellion suppressed.

Many tribal groups—the Bhils, the Gonds, the Santhals, the Kochs, for instance—also fought back against attempts to annex their territory or impose taxes on them. While some of these groups were subdued or gradually integrated into the Delhi Sultanate or the Mughal Empire, others—especially those inhabiting forested, hilly, or remote regions—managed to maintain some degree of independence.

Rani Durgavati is remembered as a valiant queen of the Garha kingdom (one of the Gond kingdoms in central India). From all accounts, she ruled wisely and made her kingdom prosperous. She kept an army of 20,000 soldiers and 1,000 elephants, with which she repelled several attempted invasions. When a general sent by Akbar attacked her kingdom in 1564, despite being outnumbered and outmatched in weaponry, she led her troops and fought bravely. Wounded, she took her own life on the battlefield to avoid capture. She was only 40. Her sacrifice became a symbol of regional pride and resistance, and she is still revered as a heroic figure in Indian history.



Fig. An artist's impression of Rani Durgavati.

Surge of the Rajputs

Because of their location in northwest India and the proud traditions they inherited from earlier dynasties (such as the Pratiharas, who had resisted the Arab invasions of Sindh a few centuries earlier), the Rajputs were often battling the invading forces from beyond the Subcontinent. They had rebuilt their kingdoms after the Khiljis' conquest, two major clans emerged in this process, in the Mewar and Marwar regions. Inspirational stories of their heroic deeds are still told today, in particular through popular ballads. Among the valorous rulers those clans produced, we met Rana Kumbha earlier. Rana Sanga (early 16th century) unified several Rajput clans, won many battles against sultans, ultimately meeting defeat against Babur at the Battle of Khanwa.

Although he inherited a wounded kingdom from his predecessors, Mewar's ruler Maharana Pratap refused to accept Mughal suzerainty and became the face of Rajput resistance. A confrontation took place at the Haldighati pass in the Aravallis in 1576, and although the Mughal army had the upper hand, Maharana Pratap escaped and pursued for years guerrilla warfare against the Mughals from the Aravalli hills, living in harsh conditions but firm on his independence. It is noteworthy that Maharana Pratap received strong support from the Bhils, who not only joined his troops as archers but also contributed their knowledge of the terrain; their service (on other occasions too) earned them a respected place in Mewar's military tradition, as the Mewar emblem shows.



Fig. The Mewar emblem, with a Bhil warrior on the left

The Ahoms

In the 13th century, the Ahom ethnic group migrated from present-day Myanmar to the Brahmaputra Valley and formed the Ahom kingdom there.

During both the Sultanate and the Mughal periods, the Ahom rulers offered stiff resistance to attempts at expansion into the Northeast. Their unique paik system called on every able-bodied man to provide service to the state through labour or military duty in exchange for land rights. This allowed the rulers to create public infrastructure and maintain a large standing force without a permanent army.

Over time, the Ahoms assimilated the local culture, promoted agriculture, encouraged diverse faiths, and contributed to the rich traditions of Assam.

In the 17th century, when Aurangzeb sent Mughal forces, briefly capturing the Ahom capital Garhgaon, the Ahoms used their knowledge of the terrain-dense forests, hills and rivers - and persistent guerrilla tactics to repulse the attack, although the latter had more men and a larger fleet of river boats. Notably, in the Battle of Saraighat (1671), fought on the Brahmaputra River near present-day Guwahati, the Ahom military commander Lachit Borphukan and his 10,000 men defeated a Mughal force of 30,000 soldiers. Ultimately, the Ahom were able to preserve their independence.



Fig. A plaque commemorating the Battle of Saraighat, with an Ahom boat in the foreground (Saraighat War Memorial Park).



Fig. Statues depicting Ahom warriors during the Battle of Saraighat.

The Rise of the Sikhs

In 15th century Punjab, Guru Nanak spread the message of equality, compassion, and the oneness of God (Ik Onkär); his followers came to be known as Sikhs. Although Sikhism began purely as a spiritual movement, the later Sikh Gurus had to respond to the growing intolerance and persecution under some Mughal rulers. When Emperor Jahangir found out that Guru Arjan had supported his rebellious son, he had Guru Arjan tortured to death. This prompted Guru Arjan's son and successor, Guru Hargobind, to introduce martial training and form a Sikh army, which fought several battles against the Mughal forces.

The Sikhs' sacred text, Guru Granth Sahib, was first compiled by Guru Arjan; Guru Tegh Bahadur's hymns were added later. It stresses that there is one God for all (who "established the earth as a home for Dharma") and enjoins Sikhs to practise truthfulness, compassion, humility and self-control, among other values. An example: "Truth is high but higher still is truthful living."

In 1675, a group of Kashmiri Pandits approached Guru Tegh Bahadur seeking protection from religious persecution. The Guru decided to stand with them and court martyrdom; arrested, Aurangzeb ordered him to convert to Islam. Despite torture, and despite witnessing two of his disciples being tortured to death, the Guru refused; on Aurangzeb's orders, he was publicly beheaded in Chandni Chowk, Delhi. In response, his son Guru Gobind Singh-the 10th and last Guru-established the Khalsa-a martial brotherhood committed to justice, equality and defence of the faith, which frequently clashed with the Mughal forces, at great cost of life.

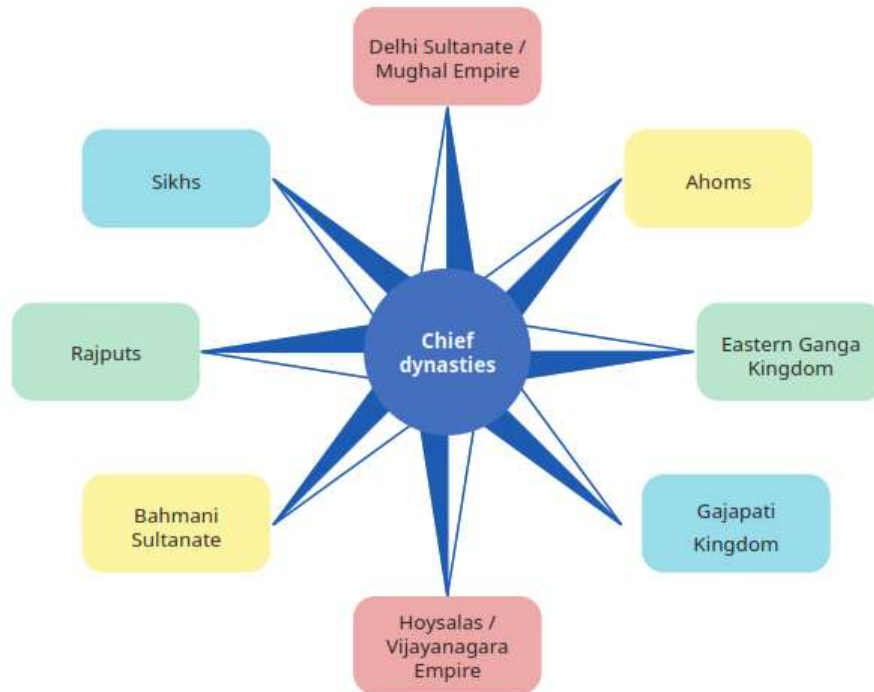


Fig. This graphic sums up the chief dynasties involved in this chapter, with a rough indication of their geographical locations.

Administration under the Delhi Sultanate

The Delhi Sultanate introduced a political system centred on the sultan, who possessed absolute authority as the political and military head, and whose duties, according to contemporary chronicles, included "defending the territories of Islam against possible aggression," "collecting fees and taxes" and "keeping in touch with public affairs and the condition of the people by personal contact." The sultan was however assisted by a council of ministers who were in charge of the various departments of the Sultanate.

One instrument of the administration was the iqta system, in which territories were assigned to nobles (iqtdars) to collect taxes which, minus expenses, were supposed to go to the Sultan's treasury; they were needed, in particular, to maintain the army. The system created a network of local administrators loyal to the central authority, but their posts were not hereditary. While taxes were levied on trade at every stage, the burden fell most heavily on the peasantry, and some contemporary accounts report considerable cruelty in extracting revenue from the land.

The Mughal administrative framework

Aiming at greater control and efficiency, Akbar reorganised his administrative machinery. The Diwan took care of the finances, while the Mir Bakhshi looked after military matters and the Khan-i-Saman was in charge of public works, trade, industry and agriculture, besides the royal household. The Sadr was responsible for justice, religious and educational matters. Such ministers were assigned to each of the empire's twelve provinces (subahs), which were further subdivided, with effective checks and balances enforced between the government officials. At the village level, traditional structures of self-governance continued more or less undisturbed.

Akbar also instituted the mansabdari system. As Abul Fazl recorded in his *Ain-i-Akbari*, which describes Akbar's administration, mansabdars (officers) according to their mansab (rank) were expected to maintain a precise number of elephants, horses, camels as well as troops for the state. This made it possible to assemble an army at a short notice without having to maintain a permanent centralised army. Regular inspections were carried out to ensure compliance. Mansabdars were generally paid by being assigned land (jagirs) and were therefore also known as jagirdars.

Despite Akbar's growing tolerance for different faiths, non-Muslims were kept in a minority in the higher echelons of the administration; for instance, the total percentage of non Muslim officials in his administration rarely exceeded one-third of the total and was often much less. Even among Muslim officials, those of foreign origin were generally favoured over those of Indian origin.

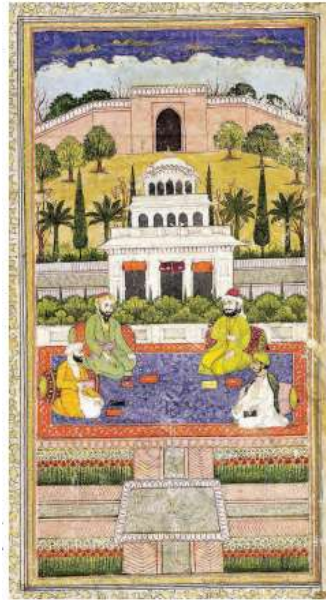


Fig. Manuscript painting of Abul Fazl, seated on a terrace with his completed chronicles before him

People's Lives

Despite shifting political powers between the 13th and 17th centuries, India witnessed vibrant economic activity, thanks to its agrarian foundations, thriving artisanal industries, community-based and temple-based economies, and extensive trade networks. Building on decentralised economic and social systems—such as *shrenis* (guilds), *jātis* (professionally defined communities), and systems for credit—the Subcontinent remained one of the wealthiest regions in the world.

Agriculture was the mainstay of the Indian economy; we have already seen how rulers relied on agrarian revenue to maintain their administration and military, typically extracting land revenue at one-fifth of the produce, though some of the sultans raised it as high as one half.

Apart from textiles, craftspeople made a wide range of products, from weapons to utensils to ornaments and jewellery items. Ship-building, essential to river and overseas trade, developed considerably in those centuries.

The hundi system also enabled merchants to transfer funds across political boundaries without physically transporting currency, making them less vulnerable to plunder.

Historians suggest that craftspeople and labourers, too, often faced harsh economic conditions. India was still a land of abundance, as testified by many Arab and European travellers, but the wealth was largely concentrated in the hands of the rulers, courtiers, high officials and the merchant class. Frequent warfare, in addition, caused forced displacement of population.

Even as most rulers across India patronised the arts, communities, too, strove to maintain or revive their traditions, many of which adapted to changing circumstances. Among those cultural traditions, a fair degree of interaction resulted in the creation of a shared heritage.

Let's recall

- This period witnessed many foreign invasions led by Turkic, Afghan, and Mughal forces, which caused widespread destruction, the fall of old dynasties, and the rise and fall of kingdoms and empires. Continuous warfare, alliances and conquests reshaped India's political boundaries.
- The period had many instances of religious intolerance. Buddhists, Jains, Hindus, Sikhs, Zoroastrians, and tribals suffered severe persecution at times, though some rulers were more broad-minded than others.
- Agriculture and trade expanded, enhancing India's wealth and connectivity with the wider world. Yet the economic condition of the common subjects generally remained harsh.
- Indian society showed adaptability and resilience in rebuilding towns, cities, temples, and other aspects of the economy. At the same time, it found ways to preserve cultural traditions and blend indigenous and foreign elements to create new cultural expressions. Many forms of art and culture, including architecture, music and painting, flourished.