
Brief Overview of Indian History: Travelers' Cliff Notes

This short e-book provides a high-level overview of Indian history from ancient times, through Muslim rule, British conquest and Independence.



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Ancient Times

Much of India's early history is one of internal factions among domestic kingdoms and incursions by nomadic warriors from distant lands. A few significant "golden ages" of unity or cultural development appear on the historical timeline. The first was the Vedic Civilization era between 1500 and 500 BCE, when Sanskrit texts laid down the foundations of Hinduism, Buddha found enlightenment, cows were accorded sacred status, and the caste system evolved. In the fourth and third centuries BCE, the Maurya Empire became the largest empire in the world under its powerful leader, Ashoka.

After the Maurya Empire dissolved, the country was fragmented into sparring kingdoms for several hundred years, an era known as the Middle Kingdom period. Empires such as the Satavahanas, Guptas, Vakatakas, and Rashtrakutas reigned over long periods of relative peace and prosperity within their respective fiefdoms. The territory as a whole, however, was not subject to a single ruler until the rise of the Islamic Delhi Sultanate in the 1200's.

It was during the Middle Kingdoms period, between 100 BC and 900 AD that Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism flourished. The caves at Ajanta and Ellora remain as a testament to that era.

Islamic Rule Under the Delhi Sultanate

Throughout the Middle Ages (around 900-1500 AD), the Islamic civilization was the predominant civilization on earth, with wide-ranging trade networks spanning across Central Asia, Southern Europe, the Middle East and Northern Africa. Science, economics, and cultural development flourished in the territories conquered and governed by the Muslims.

Turkish Muslims invaded and conquered Indian kingdoms around 1200 AD, establishing the Delhi Sultanate with centralized rule and administration. This presented a dramatic change to traditional Indian society as new moral codes of conduct and ethics influenced by Islam were synthesized into traditional Indian/Hindu/Buddhist culture. Many native Indians converted to Islam. Under Delhi Sultanate rule, India was integrated into a growing world system that led to both cultural and economic enrichment.

Islamic Rule Under the Mughals

In the 1500's, powerful Muslim warriors from the Eurasian Steppe descended upon India: the Mughals, led by Babar, a descendant of Persia's great conqueror Tamerlane and Mongolia's Ghengis Khan (that's a bad-ass bloodline!). **Babar** conquered Ibrahim Lodi, the last Delhi Sultanate in 1526.

Through military might and diplomacy, the Mughals expanded and solidified their reign throughout the Deccan Plateau in the 1550's under the third Emperor, **Akbar the Great** and his son, **Jahangir**. Unlike the more dictatorial style of the Delhi Sultanate, the Mughals forged alliances with local rulers and elites, assimilating them into key leadership and military positions. Through strategic marriage alliances, Mughal emperors came to share both Rajput Indian and Persian ancestry, creating an Indo-Persian culture with unique traits and customs.

At the height of Mughal reign, the empire encompassed more than 150 million subjects (1/4 of the world's population in 1650) with an economy ten times that France's Louis XIV. This strong, stable economy led to greater patronage of arts and culture. **Shah Jahan**, the fifth emperor, presided over the zenith of Mughal architecture, erecting monuments that still wow audiences today, such as the Taj Mahal and the Red Fort in Agra. The Taj Mahal was Shah Jahan's expression of immortal love for his favorite wife, Mumtaz Mahal, who died giving birth to the couple's 14th child.

Shah Jahan's 3rd son, **Aurangzeb**, would be the empire's 6th and near-final emperor. At the apex of Aurangzeb's 49 year rule, from 1658-1707, the territory of the empire extended across most of present-day India. Unlike his forefathers, Aurangzeb had a policy of religious intolerance, destroying Hindu temples and executing and discriminating against non-Muslim subjects with the jizyah tax (understood at the time as a "fee for Muslim protection"). This eventually instigated Hindu rebellions and Aurangzeb was forced into armed conflict with the Marathas, Rajputs, Hindu Jats, Pashtuns and Sikhs. War on so many fronts brought Mughal finances to the brink of bankruptcy.

Just decades after Aurangzeb's death, the Marathas of Maharashtra (near modern day Aurangabad) rose to prominence following the Deccan Wars, marginalizing Muslim rule in India in the 17th and 18th centuries.

Maratha Empire's "Self-Rule"

The Maratha Empire was the dominant power across India beginning after Mughal leader Aurangzeb's death in 1707. The empire was founded by Hindu resistance leader Shivaji, who

consolidated Hindu leadership across India, carved out a substantial kingdom by the 1800's and propagated a strong sense of national Hindu and Indian identity. The Marathas had a secular administration policy and allowed complete freedom of religion. Their major claim to fame was their exceptional navy.

In 1739, the British East India Company signed a treaty with the Marathas giving the British free trading rights in Maratha territory. Later, the British exploited a growing number of factions within the Maratha Empire leadership (particularly the rivalry between northern leaders Shinde and Holkar) to their own advantage. As internal conflicts within the Maratha territories escalated, each side requested help from the British in exchange for land or legal concessions. These "side treaties" with leaders other than the Peshwar (the supreme leader of the Eight Council Administration of the Marathas) violated their constitutional authorities. Ultimately, these illegal treaties led to a series of wars against the British, beginning in 1775.

Maratha rule ended in 1818 after their defeat by the British in the Third Anglo-Maratha Wars.

Company Rule and the British Raj

By defeating the Marathas, the British East India Company completed its annexation of India, which had begun 50 years earlier. Company rule across the majority of India, once established, lasted less than 40 years, though. In 1857, resentment over British East India Company rule and perceived disregard for religious and patrilineal customs blew up in full-scale armed rebellion with casualties in the hundreds of thousands.

In 1858, the British East India Company was dissolved by the British monarchy. With passage of the Government of India Act 1858, administration was transitioned from Company rule with parliamentary oversight directly to Britain's crown Queen Victoria. For the next nearly 100 years until 1947, India's "princely states" would be governed directly by the British government in the form of the British Raj.

This excerpt from BBC History sums up the era of British Raj:

There were two incontrovertible economic benefits provided by India. It was a captive market for British goods and services, and served defense needs by maintaining a large standing army at no cost to the British taxpayer. However, the economic balance sheet of the empire remains a controversial topic and the debate has revolved around whether the British developed or retarded the Indian economy.

Among the **benefits bequeathed by the British** connection were the large scale capital investments in infrastructure [...railways, canals and irrigation works, shipping and mining]; the commercialization of agriculture...establishment of an education system in English...law and order creating suitable conditions for the growth of industry and enterprise...integration of India into the world economy.

Conversely, the **British are criticized** for leaving Indians poorer and more prone to devastating famines; exhorting high taxation in cash from an impecunious people; destabilizing cropping patterns by forced commercial cropping; draining Indian revenues to pay for an expensive bureaucracy and an army beyond India's own defense needs; servicing a huge sterling debt, not ensuring that the returns from capital investment were reinvested to develop the Indian economy rather than reimbursed to London; and retaining the levers of economic power in British hands.

Indian Independence from Britain in 1947

Almost immediately upon establishment of the British Raj, the Indian National Congress was formed in 1885. The aim of the Congress was to ensure civic engagement of educated Indians in the new government structure, giving them a platform for dialog and the political discourse with the British Raj.

At the beginning of the 20th century, the Congress was still primarily representing the interests of Indian elites, rather than the public masses. It had begun to become more vocal in advocating for Independence in order to position itself as a primary party in a new political system. In 1905, a division within the party began to form between *radicals* advocating agitation and violence, if necessary, to achieve independence versus more moderate *nationalists* pushing for social reforms.

When Gandhi returned from South Africa in 1915, he began organizing farmers and urban laborers to protest against excessive land-taxes and discrimination. In 1921, with the help of moderates, he was elected President of the Indian National Congress. His social policy was committed to “Sarvodaya”, improving the lives of all members of society regardless of caste. Gandhi led 70 million participants over 25 years in a peaceful Indian independence movement.

In the 1940's, Muslim nationalism within India reached a fervor. In Gandhi's vision of independence, logic of numbers meant that Hindus would have majority rule, as Muslims were just 20% of the population. The Muslim League insisted it would support independence only if accompanied by partition, creating two separate nations (Pakistan and India).

In 1945, the Labor Party in Britain was elected to power following World War II, which had brought Britain to its knees. The Labor Party sent Lord Louis Mountbatten to India in 1947 as its last viceroy. Under political pressure from the United States to end imperialism and a decimated budget following the War, Lord Mountbatten was instructed to transfer power to Indian political parties in just six months. **In August 1947, Britain granted independence, but split its empire into two countries: Hindu-majority India and Muslim-majority Pakistan.**

Mass displacement of Muslims, Sikhs, and Hindus occurred across the new boundaries, accompanied by hysterical bloodbaths during the migration. An estimated million lives were lost in the chaos. Despite the creation of a Muslim state, millions of Muslims remained in independent India. Today, it is the largest minority group in a non-Muslim state.

In January, 1948, Gandhi was assassinated by a Hindu nationalist, Nathuram Godse, who thought Gandhi had been too accommodating to the Muslims. Jawaharlal Nehru was elected Prime Minister of India. Muhammad Ali Jinnah became the Governor-General of Pakistan.