

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE

# INDIAN POLITICAL HISTORY

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## **Contents**

Part I : PREHISTORY

Part II : INDUS VALLEY CIVILIZATION

Part III : INDO-ARYAN CIVILIZATION

Part IV : CLASSICAL PERIOD

Part V : EARLY POSTCLASSICAL PERIOD

Part VI : LATE POSTCLASSICAL PERIOD

Part VII : EARLY MODERN PERIOD

Part VIII : 19<sup>th</sup> CENTURY

Part IX : EARLY 20<sup>th</sup> CENTURY

Part X : LATE 20<sup>th</sup> CENTURY

## Part I: PREHISTORY

### Overview

The political system of prehistoric India is purely a matter of speculation, although some parallels can be drawn from ethnographic research on modern stone-age groups. In general, we can assume that the small number of individuals in any group (estimated between 20-60) did not require any formal system at all. Nevertheless, it is reasonable to believe that some methods of censure, resource distribution and status recognition would have existed. The important point is that these processes would have been informal and flexible.

### Questions/discussion

Stone-age societies are usually described as 'tribes.' What is a tribe and how does its political system differ from that of more complex political systems?

### Reading

Upinder Singh, *A History of Ancient and Early Medieval India: From the Stone Age to the 12<sup>th</sup> Century* (Longman, 2008)

Robin Dennell and Martin Porr (eds.), *Southern Asia, Australia, and the Search for Human Origins* (Cambridge, 2014)

## Part II: INDUS VALLEY CIVILIZATION

### Overview

The political system of the Indus Valley civilisation (c. 3000-1500 BCE), which can only be reconstructed from the (extensive) archaeological record, is still largely a matter of speculation and debate. The key question is the degree of centralisation and possible presence of a ruling elite. Without a successful decipherment of the Indus script, these questions may remain unanswered for a long time.

### Theocracy theory

Based on a now-discarded analogy from ancient civilisations in Mesopotamia and Egypt, it was once assumed that the IVC was a theocracy, with its centre at Mohenjo-Daro or Harappa. A famous figure of a bearded man was put forward as 'a priest-king', and a large building in Mohenjo-Daro (the 'citadel') was widely accepted as a centre for ritual and state authority. The citadel, however, has recently been identified as a grain storage facility.

### Centralisation

Nevertheless, some degree of centralised state organisation linking the wide geographic spread of the IVC is suggested by the uniformity of houses, mud-bricks, weight measures, inscribed seals, grid pattern of streets, street drainage and grain storage. Centralisation is most obvious in the sophisticated drainage system. Houses were equipped with bathing areas, latrines and sewage drains. Linked to larger mains, which eventually emptied outside the city walls, the sewers would have removed wastewater from the habitation areas and deposited fertile sludge on the surrounding agricultural fields. On the other hand, the vast territory and rudimentary transport system would have made centralisation difficult to achieve.

### Regionalism

Recent research has tended to support the opposite claim: that the IVC political system was dominated by regionalism. New evidence has led to the idea that there were six or seven regional administrative centres, each with links to villages in the hinterland. These regional centres, it is claimed, were the major cities (Mohenjo-Daro, Harappa, Lothal, Rakhigari, Kalibangan, Dholavira and Rupar), where political and commercial power was concentrated. Each centre operated like a city-state or a complex chieftaincy. Power was shared among various elite kin-groups rather than a hereditary monarchy. And power was gained through trade rather than warfare.

## Discussion/questions

1. The evidence for a centralised state in the Indus Valley civilisation is mixed. Analyse the evidence (such as bricks, weights, seals and drainage) to build an argument that uses comparative data from at least one other world civilisation (preferably from the same time period). In conclusion, explain why the issue of state organisation is important not only for an understanding of the Indus Valley civilisation but for later Indian history, as well.
2. The overwhelming majority of the IVC population lived in small towns and villages, yet most of the archaeological evidence comes from a handful of large urban centres. Does this discrepancy distort our understanding of the civilisation? Although our first answer might be 'yes,' consider that the villages were connected to the cities by trade networks and possibly political links as well. In addition, most artefacts are found in both urban and rural sites.

## Reading

Burton Stein, *A History of India* (Blackwell, 1998)

Romila Thapar, *Early India. From the Origins to 1300 AD* (Penguin, 2002), pp. 1-97

Mark Kenoyer, *Ancient Cities of the Indus Valley* (OUP, Karachi, 2010, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed.)

## Part III: INDO-ARYAN CIVILIZATION

### Overview

The major development during the early history of the Indo-Aryans was their gradual integration with indigenous peoples. The tribe-based political system of the early Indo-Aryans, rooted in their semi-nomadic pastoralism, evolved into chiefdoms.

### Tribes

Early Indo-Aryans were organised into tribes (*jana*), with a chief (*raja*), who was advised by two different tribal councils (*sabha* and *samiti*). As Indo-Aryan populations moved ever eastward, from the rivers of the Punjab to the plains of north India, particularly the Gangetic region, these semi-nomadic pastoralists mixed with indigenous peoples, producing settled agricultural communities. Although the tribe remained the basis of Indo-Aryan society, power became dependent less on wealth and more on the ability to forge alliances. The most powerful tribes of the ancient period were the Panchala, formed from five independent tribes, and the Kuru, an amalgam of two separate tribes.

### Horse-sacrifice

In addition to warfare, the ancient Indo-Aryans also use an elaborate ritual to extend their territory. This was the horse sacrifice (*ashvamedha*). If a ruler wished to extend his territory, he performed the ritual by releasing a horse to wander for a year. During that time, anyone could challenge the new territorial claim by attacking the warriors accompanying the wandering horse. If no attack took place, the horse was taken back to the ruler and sacrificed as a consecration of the ruler's new territory.

### Chiefdoms

These larger, composite tribes that controlled greater territory were called *janapadas* (lit. 'foothold of a tribe'). We have the names of nearly 40 chiefdoms from early Sanskrit texts. By 800 BCE these Neolithic farming and pastoralist communities combined into yet larger political structures called *maha* ('great') *janapadas*, or complex chiefdoms. Sixteen of these complex chiefdoms dominated north India in this period, stretching from Taxila, in the northwest to Anga, in the far east. These include Kosala, with its capital at Ayodhya, where Rama of the *Ramayana* ruled; Magadha, with its capital at Pataliputra, later the capital of the Mauryan Empire; Kuru, with its capital at Indraprastha, whose two factions fought the war described in the *Mahabharata*.

## Discussion/Questions

1. Early Indo-Aryans were organised into tribes (*jana*) and later developed chiefdoms (*janapada*), which in turn grew into complex chiefdoms (*mahajanapada*). What are the standard definitions of these political systems: tribe, chiefdom and complex chiefdom? And how does a complex chiefdom differ from a 'state'?
2. The ritual of the horse-sacrifice has strong parallels in other Indo-European cultures (see the book by B. Lincoln, listed below). Can you think of other ritualised events that promote the power of a political ruler in modern times?

### Reading

Bruce Lincoln, *Death, War and Sacrifice* (Chicago, 1991)

A.L. Basham, *The Wonder that was India* (Sidgwick and Jackson, 1963)

David W. Anthony, *The Horse the Wheel and Language. How Bronze- Age Riders from the Eurasian Steppes Shaped the Modern World* (Princeton, 2007)

## Part IV: CLASSICAL PERIOD

### Overview

During this period (c.500 BCE-500 CE), the existing system of chiefdoms evolved into the first ever centralised empire in India. The Mauryan Empire then fragmented before much of the subcontinent was again united under the Guptas. However, the vast expanse of the Gupta Empire meant that the state was forced to cede power to local rulers, which in turn meant that the centre relied more and more on symbolic power. This was a trend that continued through the medieval and early modern periods.

### Mauryan Empire

The long evolution in north India from tribe to chiefdom to state culminated in the establishment of the Mauryan Empire (321- 185 BCE). Its more immediate cause, however, was Alexander's invasion, which stimulated feuding rulers to join together for protection. Chandragupta, founder of the empire, took advantage of the chaos caused by both the Greek incursion in the northwest and the breakdown of smaller kingdoms elsewhere to conquer large swathes of territory, with the exception of south India. The Mauryas defeated a second Greek invasion in the northwest and eventually pushed east, extending their authority to the Bay of Bengal. At its height, the Mauryan state was an efficient bureaucracy with a large civil service. Despite its centralised administration, however, the Mauryan state could not exert control over its extensive territory. Four main provinces were controlled by local princes, while other regions were run by governors and salaried officials. The last Mauryan ruler was assassinated by one of his own generals in 185 BCE.

### Pataliputra

The capital of the Mauryan Empire was Pataliputra, one of the great cities of the ancient world. It was built in 489 BCE at the confluence of the Ganges and one of its tributaries, where it served as the capital of the three successive polities: the Magadha chiefdom, the Nanda chiefdom, the Mauryan state and then the Shunga kingdom. At the time of the Mauryas, when its population reached nearly 200,000, the city was a thriving commercial centre and a seat of Buddhist learning. Its beauty and opulence, including palaces and Buddhist stupas, are described by Megasthenes (c. 350-290 BCE), a Greek ambassador who resided in the city for several years (c. 302-298 BCE).

### Arthashastra

The rules of Indian statecraft were codified in the *Arthashastra* ('Science of Power'), a Sanskrit treatise composed by Kautilya in about 400 BCE. It appears to describe an idealised state, based largely on the composite chiefdoms that preceded the Mauryan Empire. Not very dissimilar to Machiavelli's *The Prince*, it guides would-be rulers through a murky political world of betrayal, deception, spying and assassination.

### Post-Mauryan states

Following the break-up of the Mauryan Empire, a series of smaller but still powerful states ruled north India. The first of these was the Shungas, who retained Pataliputra as their capital and reigned from 185-78 BCE. Next came the Shakas (or Indo-Scythians), a central Asian people who migrated and fought their way into India in the first century CE. Although they controlled large tracts of territory in the north and west, they ruled for only a brief time. Another kingdom with its origins in Central Asia was the Kushana (or Kushan), which ruled Bactria and the surrounding regions (modern-day Afghanistan and Pakistan) before pushing south into India, where they ruled from about 100-250 CE. The Deccan was ruled by the Satavahanas (c. 200 BCE-230 CE), fighting off two invasions by the Shakas along the way. Less centralised than the Mauryan Empire, the Satavahana state was based on alliances with local rulers. They were also the first Indian kingdom to issue coinage with portraits of their rulers.

### Gupta Empire

Most of India was once again unified in a single administration under the Gupta Empire (320-c. 550 CE). Like the Satavahanas, the Gupta rulers used alliances, in the form of dynastic marriages, and warfare to gain control over territory. Chandragupta I (r. 320-335 CE, not to be confused with Chandragupta Maurya several centuries earlier) married a princess from the Licchavi clan (in the Himalayan foothills), and his son, Samudragupta (r. 335-385 CE), extended the kingdom to the Deccan by more marriages. The empire was administered by a cadre of officials dispatched to localities to oversee an extensive system of tax-free land grants to Brahmins and merchants. This system permitted local leaders to exercise considerable authority and yet be responsible to the centre. The result was a state in which regional units and diverse communities prospered and cohered in a political whole.

### Decentralisation

The Gupta state thus instituted two key features of government that characterised states throughout the medieval period and into the pre-modern period. First, states and localities existed in a balance of power. The authority of the centre was residual in that judicial and police functions were left in the hands of local rulers, guilds and associations. Second, and as a result of this decentralisation, the centre assumed more and more symbolic power and authority.

### Kings as gods

Gupta kings became the objects of worship and were treated almost like gods. The beginnings of this royal cult are seen in early Buddhism, where the Buddha is called *chakravartin* (lit. 'Turner of the Wheel'), an epithet for the Sun-god or ideal ruler). The Mauryan ruler Ashoka referred to himself as 'Beloved of the Gods,' while the Kushana kings adopted the title 'Son of God'. Later Gupta rulers portrayed themselves, on coins and in ceremonies, as equal to the gods. In early south India, the paucity of Brahmins meant that kings were the divine representatives on earth and over time became regarded as gods. For example, the Tamil word for 'king's house' came to mean 'temple.'

### Questions/Discussion

1. During the Gupta Empire, the images of rulers were depicted on coins in various scenes, killing animals, playing an instrument and performing the horse-sacrifice. What influence did this imagery play in promoting the cult of the ruler?
2. Buddhism gained the patronage of many important rulers during this period, including Asoka. But Buddhism was an other-worldly faith focused on meditation and enlightenment. What compromises did Buddhist kings make in order to maintain power?

### Reading

John Strong, *Relics of the Buddha* (Princeton, 2004)

Romila Thapar, *Early India: From the Origins to A.D. 1300* (California, 2004, various editions)

F.R. Allchin, *The Archaeology of Early Historic South Asia: The Emergence of Cities and States* (Cambridge, 1995)

A.L. Basham, *The Wonder that was India* (Sidgwick and Jackson, 1963)

## Part V: EARLY POSTCLASSICAL PERIOD

### Overview

During the five centuries between the demise of the Gupta Empire (c. 500 CE) and the rise of the Delhi Sultanate (c. 1,000 CE), north India was ruled by smaller states, with the single exception of Harsha's brief rule. South India saw the rise of the grand empire of the Cholas, the golden age of Tamil history. Throughout the period, even in centralised empires, political structures tended toward increasing regionalism, with more power retained in localities, especially through the land-grant system.

### North India

**Harsha** Although Harsha's kingdom was exceptional in terms of the extent of territory, its administration illustrates the political regionalism of the time. As with the other kingdoms in the south and on the edges of the Gangetic heartland, territory was defined less by administration than by language and sectarian affiliations. Boundaries were fluid. Although texts continued to use the old rhetoric of a central power, new political, linguistic, religious and literary boundaries were emerging. Indeed, the formal control of Harsha's state did not extend much beyond the Gangetic plain. Instead, the kingdom was held together by using land-grants to create alliances with local elites (called *mahasamanta*), leaving conquered rulers on their thrones. Texts list six different levels of vassals in Harsha's administration. One inscribed copper-plate dated 632 CE records a gift of land to two Brahmins and lists several vassals as guarantors of the gift. Meanwhile the centre contented itself with tribute and homage.

**Feudalism** Were these local elites similar to the feudal vassals of medieval European kings? As with their European counterparts, these Indian elites were permitted near total autonomy in their locality and provided their overlords with military service. But it would be wrong to assume that, like European vassals, these Indian elites held their land-grants in lieu of salaries. In fact, the Indian elites were territorial rulers in their own right, though on a limited scale. They held land, either by inheritance or conquest, independently of the grant from the centre. It seems likely that the land-grants were actually a method by which the king extended his circle of subordinates, as a display of his power.

### South India

**Chola Empire** The Chola kingdom (9-13<sup>th</sup> c. CE) is an even clearer example of local autonomy co-existing with imperial authority. The smallest administrative unit was the *nadu*, or locality, usually comprising several villages. The Chola kingdom contained several hundred *nadus*, of varying size, suggesting that they were not artificially created by the state but were pre-existing units of local government. Each *nadu* had its own council, who were responsible for land assessment and tax collection. Although not appointed by the king, the local council passed on a portion of these taxes to the king's representative at the *nadu*-level. Each *nadu* incorporated one or more *nagarams*, which were councils of powerful merchants who collectively owned land and collected taxes from peasants working that land. On top of this local, indigenous government, the Chola rulers created an administrative unit of the *valanadu* (or 'mega-nadu'), controlled by officers appointed by the court. The largest administrative unit, with several *valanadus*, was the *mandalam*, or 'province.'

**Administration** Inscriptions mention four different officers, who were involved in revenue collection, land surveying and military operations. There were two grades of administrators, and the offices tended to be hereditary. The legal system was administered through a system of royal courts acting in liaison with village courts and caste councils. In addition to land tax, with four different categories depending on fertility, there were taxes on goods in transit, houses and professions.

**Military** Chola conquests on land and on sea were enabled by a large and well-organised standing army. The king was the commander-in-chief, followed by three ranks of officers and dozens of regiments. Soldiers wore metal armour and used spears, bows and arrows and shields. The army also had hundreds of horses and elephants. The famous victories in the Bay of Bengal and the Java Sea were possible because the Chola navy had hundreds of ships at its disposal, many equipped with weapons.

## Questions/Discussion

1. A broad process of regionalism features in political, social and cultural spheres during this period. In general, it involved the gradual strengthening of local autonomy over a centralised state. While this process is widespread in world history, the Indian variant was primarily driven by language. Look at the rise of regional languages (and scripts) in this period, and then compare that with the fragmentation of newly-Independent India into linguistic states in the 1950s and 1960s.
2. The rulers of the Chola Empire built massive temples and endowed them with great wealth, including large swathes of agricultural land. These structures, elaborately decorated with sculptures and employing thousands of people, became symbols of imperial power. As one example, Rajaraja I (r. 985-1014 CE), considered the 'Great Chola', built a temple at his capital Tanjore, which was decorated with many images of Siva as the destroyer of the three cities (Tripurantaka).

## Reading

Noboru Karashima, *A Concise History of South India* (Oxford, 2014)  
K. A. Nilakanta Sastri, *A History of South India* (Oxford, Delhi, 2000)  
Burton Stein, *A History of India* (Blackwell, 1998)  
Romila Thapar, *Early India. From the Origins to 1300 AD* (Penguin, 2002)

## Part VI: LATE POSTCLASSICAL PERIOD

### Overview

The Delhi Sultanate (1206-1526 CE) dominates this period prior to the Mughal Empire in Indian history. The Muslim rulers of the Sultanate, mostly Turkic-speaking elites from Central Asia and Afghanistan, brought changes to the prevailing political systems in the subcontinent. Drawing on Persian examples, they introduced a more hierarchical, formalised and militaristic form of administration. Again, however, south India presented a different picture, especially with the rise of the Hindu Vijayanagar kingdom.

### Administration

The early Delhi Sultanate adapted a Persian model of government, making it more militaristic and aristocratic. The Sultan was nominally the head of all aspects of government, although in practice he had a number of ministers who were also responsible. His second-in-command was the Wazir, who headed the finance department and acted as head of the civil service. Next in importance came the Diwan-i-ariz, who was in charge of the military and responsible for recruitment and discipline in the army. The Diwan-i-insha was the chief secretary to the sultan and in charge of all royal correspondence. Three other ministers handled foreign affairs, religious affairs and judicial affairs. At the level of the province (*iqta*), administration was in the hands of military officers (*muqti*) and noblemen who were given land rent-free (*iqtadar*), both of whom were appointed by the Sultan. Provinces were divided into districts (*shiq*), which were sub-divided into group of villages (*paragana*).

### Reforms

This basic structure was reformed by Sultan Alauddin (r. 1296-1316 CE) in order to extend central authority over his expanded territory. Following his successful defence of Delhi against two Mongol campaigns (1299, 1307-08), he conquered new territory in Gujarat and Rajasthan before driving deep into the south and taking the ancient Hindu city of Madurai in 1310. Thereafter, Alauddin undertook a massive land survey on the basis of which a standard tax was levied. Half the crop from arable land and a fixed tax on all herded animals was collected by military officers in the provinces and stored in state granaries. The net effect was to raise more revenue and to reduce the authority of local elites, who also faced new taxes on their horses, clothing and houses. Old ruling families, however, were permitted to retain their symbolic power as tributaries to Delhi. In effect, however, Delhi governed the countryside from a few garrisoned cities and plundered whenever the need arose.

### Reforms Reversed

Most of these reforms were reversed by Alauddin's successor, Muhammad Tughluq (r.1324-1351 CE), who instituted a new department of agriculture dedicated to expanding arable land. He also reorganised the revenue department and demanded reports from provincial officers, showing income and expenditure. He also moved the capital (temporarily and foolishly) to the Deccan so that the centre, through its officers and its army, had more control over the provinces.

### Military

The rapid and near-total conquest of India by the Delhi Sultanate emphasises the sometimes overlooked role of warfare as a factor in shaping Indian history. The military superiority of the Turkic and Afghan armies was considerable. Unlike their Hindu opponents, these soldiers could shoot arrows while riding a horse. It was said that a good horseman could shoot six arrows a minute. Some of them also used a cross bar to launch arrows that could penetrate metal armour. These skills came naturally to the warriors from Central Asia, where (unlike in India) the climate and topography was conducive to horse breeding. Muslim armies also used war-elephants, to batter down fortifications and to scatter soldiers on a battlefield. The sultans owned thousands of these animals, which also became a symbol of royal power.

### Vijayanagar kingdom

The advance of the sultanate to the south was only checked by the rise of the Vijayanagar kingdom (1336–1565 CE). The capital city (Vijayanagar, 'City of Victory') was a vast complex of temples (and mosques) that displayed wealth and ambition, but the kings gained their control by a skilful network of alliances with adjacent Hindu and minor Muslim rulers. They even improved their army by recruiting Muslim soldiers and borrowing their techniques of warfare. And when the Portuguese arrived on the west coast of India in 1498, they were quick to enter into treaty and trade arrangements.

### Discussion/questions

1. The rapid spread of Muslim rule across north India and the Deccan is often explained as the result of superior warfare skills and technology. What role can also be ascribed to the hierarchical command structure of the Delhi Sultanate?
2. The Vijayanagar Empire in south India used a largely Hindu model of royal rule, including a prime minister, cabinet officials and chief secretary. The administration of the royal palace in Vijayanagar had 72 separate departments. However, unlike preceding kingdoms, it also maintained a large standing army and developed a sophisticated navy, perhaps the first in Indian history.

### Reading

Barbara Metcalf, *Islam in South Asia in Practice* (Princeton, 2009)  
Aziz Ahmad, *An Intellectual History of Islam in India* (Edinburgh, 1969)  
Burton Stein, *Vijayanagara* (Cambridge, 2005)  
Richard Eaton, *A Social History of the Deccan, 1300–1761* (Cambridge, 2006)

## Part VII: EARLY MODERN PERIOD

### Overview

By the 17<sup>th</sup> c. CE, the Mughal Empire was the most centralised and efficient state in Indian history. Its success is attributable not just to military superiority (often exaggerated) but also to political consolidation and the individual genius of Akbar. Although centralisation had been achieved to varying degrees by previous regimes, deeply rooted institutions in the countryside concerning land and loyalty were not easily replaced by new external networks. For example, the money-grants that funded the military officials of the Delhi Sultanate turned into patrimonies that eventually put land revenue beyond state control. However, clever administrative reforms enabled the Mughals to surpass their predecessors in maintaining authority in the regions.

### Legacy

The Mughals also retained many of reforms introduced by their predecessors. In particular, the Mughal administrative system was more or less the same as that used by the Delhi Sultanate. One significant exception is that the Mughals added a supra-local unit of the *suba* or province.

### Administration

The administration of the Mughal Empire was many-layered. At the top, just below the royal court at Delhi (and briefly Fatehpur Sikri) was the province (*suba*). The province was ruled by a governor or (*subadar*), who had an administrative structure that replicated that in Delhi, with the full complement of staff and departments. The number of provinces varied from 12 under Akbar to 22 under Aurangzeb, and the size also varied: Bengal and Delhi were separate provinces. A province was divided into ‘districts’, (a term invented by the British years later) called *sarkars*. A district itself was made up of many *paraganas*, which in turn were comprised of village clusters. The *paraganas* were later, under British rule, reorganised and renamed as taluks, a unit of administration and taxation still used in present-day India.

### Akbar’s reforms

Akbar (r.1556-1605 CE) wisely retained land revenue as the basis of his government, but he also introduced reforms. First, he initiated an agrarian survey to identify types of land, crop prices and yields in order to calculate taxes. All land was divided into two categories: *khalisa* and *jagir*. Revenue from the first went to the imperial treasury, and that from the second was assigned to Muslim noblemen/landholders (*jagirdars*) in lieu of a salary. With this *jagir* system Akbar replaced the *iqta* system of the Delhi Sultanate. Second, he required taxes to be paid in cash, and he set about regulating the minting and currency system to enable payment in silver coins. More fundamentally, he created the *mansabdari* system (borrowed from Persia), with 33 different grades of administrative cadre. At the top were the officers (*mansabdars*), who were paid a salary directly from the centre in return for service to the centre. These officers could be posted anywhere in the empire, a practice that discouraged the development of patrimonies that had plagued earlier governments. However, the tax was actually collected by intermediaries, *zamindars*, who became a class of landed gentry. Akbar’s treasury was full, but the *zamindars* enjoyed a large degree of local autonomy. In sum, the new *mansabdari* and cash-salary system—rational, transparent and immune from local loyalties—were the keystones of the Mughal state.

### Judiciary

The centralised and efficient nature of the Mughal government is illustrated by its judicial system. It consisted of a set of three courts on each of four levels: the imperial courts in Delhi; the provincial (*suba*) courts; the district (*sarkar*) courts; and the sub-district (*paragana*) courts. All these courts were presided over by judges (*qazi*) of differing grades of competence, and each court had its own jurisdiction. At the imperial level, for example, the emperor’s court heard cases on appeal as well as criminal and civil cases of first instance. A second court heard cases concerning revenue, and a third specialised in military cases.

### Military

Although the Mughal Empire was born in war and was sustained by war, by the end of its rule, the military was the weakest part of its government. When Babur, the first emperor, won his decisive battle in 1526, his matchlock men and mobile field guns were no match for his enemy, whose idea of battle etiquette did not include fire arms. But when Aurangzeb, the last emperor, went into battle he commanded an inferior force. The problem was not lack of numbers. Historians estimate that the Mughal army consisted of 440,000 infantry, musketeers, and artillery men, and 185,000 cavalry. The main problem was a fragmented structure. The Mughal army comprised four different types of soldiers (those paid for and supplied by the *mansabdars*; those paid for by the state but commanded by *mansabdars*; those paid for by the state but of a higher grade; and those provided by provincial elites, such as the *zamindars*). The Mughal artillery was also of poor quality, and Akbar's efforts to procure new guns from the Portuguese failed. In addition, there was a shortage of trained officers, discipline was lacking and the huge number of camp followers (families of soldiers and courtiers, etc.) meant that the army was cumbersome and slow-footed.

### Discussion/questions

1. The Mughal Empire has been called the greatest empire in Indian history. Looking back to the other major states (Maurya, Gupta, Chola, Vijayanagar, Delhi Sultanate), what specific features of the Mughal political system distinguish them from their predecessors?
2. Analyse Akbar's reign as an example of the 'great man' theory of history and consider also how he was influenced by his context.
3. A state as large and as efficient as the Mughal Empire requires good communication between its various administrative levels and departments. Persian was the official language of the Mughal Empire, but many other languages and scripts were also used throughout its vast territory. Select one province and research the number of languages used in it.

### Reading

John F. Richards, *The Mughal Empire* (Cambridge, 1993)  
Ainslie T. Embree, *Sources of Indian Tradition, Vol I* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.) (Columbia, 1988)  
Ibn Hasan, *The Central Structure of the Mughal Empire* (Oxford, 1936)

### Part VIII: 19<sup>th</sup> CENTURY

#### Overview

British rule was built on the foundations of the Mughal state. The new rulers simply took over the existing administrative structure, revenue collection system, personnel structure and its terminology. They even retained Persian as the official language until the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. The colonial state penetrated the provinces even more than the Muslim state that it superseded. Change came within (Indian resistance to foreign rule) and without (British ideas of democracy and equality). By the end of this turbulent century, the colonial government looked as if it was riding the crest of an imperial wave, when in fact the undercurrents were about to sweep it away.

#### Administration

British India was divided into provinces (earlier known as presidencies) and independent (or princely) states. Provinces, such as Bengal, Madras, Bombay, Northwest and Central, covered about 60% of British India and were under direct rule. The princely states, which numbered in the hundreds, were under indirect rule, which meant that the Indian ruler remained on his throne, with his retinue and symbols of power, and retained control over internal affairs. The external affairs of the princely states were in the hands of the British government in Calcutta. And in practice, even domestic matters were subject to (often substantial) British influence in the figure of the British Resident. The provinces were run by a Governor (Lt. Governor or Chief Commissioner), who was advised by a council. Within each province, districts were governed by a Collector (or Commissioner), who usually held executive, legislative and judicial powers. Each district was then sub-divided into *taluks* (an administrative unit borrowed from the Mughals) for purposes of revenue collection.

## Reforms

Major reforms followed in the wake of the revolt in 1857-58. The British Crown in London became a third tier of government, with a Secretary of State for India and a council of advisors. In Calcutta, the Governor-General (later Viceroy) was now answerable to the Secretary of State, although he and his executive council still held primary responsibility for legislation. In the 1860s, the council in Calcutta became a cabinet and was enlarged to include 12 members serving two-year terms. Half of these members were British officers who oversaw a department, such as revenue, military and finance. The other members were British nationals living in India and Indians. In the provinces, legislative powers (which had been taken away in the 1830s) were restored. And in the 1890s, rules for provincial legislatures were changed to include Indian representation.

## Indian Civil Service (ICS)

After 1857-58, administrative officers in India came from the ICS, a newly-created branch of the civil service in Britain. The ICS recruited and trained officers, who were then sent to govern British India. Some were engineers, some were doctors and some were judges, but the most important were the political officers. For their first posting they were sent to a district as an assistant to the Collector and then often spent their whole lives in India, climbing up an administrative hierarchy with many rungs. At first, this elite cadre was recruited almost entirely from an 'old-boy' network among the upper-class in Britain. After examinations were introduced in the 1870s, the social base widened. In the 1880s were Indians permitted to join this club and assist in the governance of their own country.

## Military

The English East India Company recruited armies to protect its trading stations along the coasts and later its revenue collection inland. Each of the three presidencies (Bengal, Madras and Bombay) had its own army and its own Commander-in-Chief. All three armies contained British units, with British soldiers and officers, as well as Indian units, with British officers and Indian soldiers recruited from the so-called 'martial races' (for example, the Sikhs and Gurkhas). After 1857-58, the three separate armies retained their independent status and their own command structure, although they were increasingly under the control of the Commander-in-Chief in Calcutta, who was now a member of the Governor-General's Executive Council. In 1895, the three separate armies were amalgamated into the British Indian Army.

## Collaboration

Although British rule rested on economic power and military strength, British India was built on local collaboration. Rajas ceded sovereignty in return for a pension; landed groups turned over tax revenues while the District Collector protected their rights; peasants and marginalised groups became soldiers in the British army; merchants and traders sold goods to foreign entrepreneurs. Without local cooperation, the British Raj would not have been possible. Consider the fact that by the end of the century, a country of about 230 million people was governed by about 1,000 officers (95% of whom were British). It was not uncommon for a rural district the size of three English counties to be run by a 25-year-old British officer, a younger fellow countryman and three Indian clerks.

## Discussion questions

1. The Revolt/Mutiny in 1857-58 shook the confidence of the colonial rulers and prompted a reconsideration of their government policies and political goals. Analyse the causes and consequences of this crucial event. Include careful descriptions of who actually did revolt, where and when. Similarly, pay attention to the reactions among different groups within the colonial state—military, government, and public opinion—and in the UK.
2. Colonialism in India was a complex set of economic and political compromises between Europeans and Indians. Both groups were heterogeneous, with different kinds of actors and sub-groups, possessing diverse motivations and resources. Describe the rise of British colonial rule by a study of this interaction in three or four key events.

## Reading

Burton Stein, *A History of India* (Blackwell, 1998)

Andrew Porter, *The Oxford History of the British Empire, Vol.3, The Nineteenth Century* (Oxford, 1998)

C. A. Bayly, *Indian Society and the Making of the British Empire* (Cambridge, 1990)

## Part IX: EARLY 20<sup>th</sup> CENTURY

### Overview

The first half of the twentieth century was dominated by the rising tide of nationalism that culminated in Indian Independence in 1947. The British state was also active, at first trying to consolidate its power, by partitioning Bengal and moving the capital to Delhi, and later trying to cling on to power, by making reforms to the political system. In the end, however, the only solution was the removal of the rulers themselves.

### Partition of Bengal

The partition of Bengal Province in 1905 created a Hindu west and a Muslim east. The stated reason for this division was administrative—such a large territory, about the size of France, was ungovernable—but the consequences were political. Bengali Hindus in the west feared that they would lose power once they were bundled into a province that included other Hindus from Bihar. On the other hand, Muslims in the east generally welcomed the idea of governing themselves free from the domination of Hindu Calcutta. This ill-considered partition led to a greater political awareness among Muslims and to a widening of the communal divide when Muslims and Hindus voted in separate elections in 1909. The error was recognised, and in 1911 Bengal was reunited, only to be divided again after Independence in 1947.

### Delhi becomes capital

In December 1911, King George V came to Delhi to be enthroned as Emperor of India at a durbar, or royal ceremony, redolent of the Mughals. At this royal conclave of rulers, he announced that the capital would be moved from Calcutta to Delhi and that a magnificent 'new' Delhi would be built. The Durbar was a grand celebration of imperialism, with maharajas in sumptuous dress, bedecked elephants and opulent carriages processing in front of the Emperor and Empress. But the decision to move the capital was motivated by a desire to punish Calcutta as a centre of nationalist agitation and to locate government in a more neutral city.

### Administration

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the government of British India, based in Calcutta, consisted of a governor-general and his Executive Council of 10-16 members, a few of whom were Indian. In the provinces, a governor held considerable authority, subject to an advisory council. However, none of these office-holders was elected, and real power lay with the government in London, who appointed and recalled the governor-general and governors. In the course of the next fifty years, this structure would be amended again and again, until Indians elected by Indians gained control of their government.

### Morley-Minto Reforms

Under pressure from growing nationalist sentiment, the government in London passed the Indian Councils Act 1909, which recommended the changes known as the Morley-Minto reforms. These reforms increased 'native' participation in the advisory councils in Calcutta and the provinces. More radical was the fact that some Indians would be elected, rather than appointed. Indians were also permitted to discuss budgetary matters for the first time, and other Indian institutions (universities, district committees and landlord groups) were empowered to suggest laws. A controversial element of these reforms was the concession to Muslims for a certain number of seats in provincial legislatures to be reserved for them. This created 'communal' representation, which would bedevil the politics of India until Independence in 1947.

### Montagu-Chelmsford Reforms

The growing clamour for independence, plus the blow to the empire delivered by WWI, softened British resistance to self-government and resulted in the Montagu-Chelmsford reforms. These reforms, which were announced in the Government of India Act 1919, promised that Britain would promote the 'the gradual development of free institutions in India with a view to ultimate self-government.' In order to achieve this, greater powers were conceded to legislative councils at both the central and provincial levels. The changes for the province were the more fundamental and initiated a system called 'dyarchy,' or 'dual rule.' Each provincial legislative council would have two sections. One section would consist of councillors, or ministers, appointed as before by London, who were responsible for 'hard-core' departments, such as finance, army, home affairs and law. The other section would consist of Indian ministers chosen by the governor from the elected members of the council. These Indian ministers would oversee the 'nation-building' departments, such as agriculture, education and public works.

### Government of India Act 1935

The political change initiated by these reforms culminated in the Government of India Act 1935, which laid down the basis for Indian independence. Now the provincial legislatures were given real autonomy, more seats would be elected and dyarchy was abolished—all ministers would now be chosen from the Indian members who had been elected to the legislature. Provincial governors would still be appointed, but they were to accept recommendations from Indian ministers, except in cases where legislation would threaten civil disturbance or the rights of minorities. At the level of central government, the act called for a 'Federation of India', comprised of British provinces and princely states. It also introduced dyarchy at the federal level, with some departments given to Indian ministers and others to British ministers. The central legislature was granted more seats (including some reserved for women, Anglo-Indians and Indian Christians), and the franchise was extended. In addition, Burma was separated from India and given its own colonial government. As a half-way house between colonialism and nationalism, the 1935 act was unwieldy and satisfied no one. However, this complex machinery was put in place for the provincial elections in 1937, a sort of dress rehearsal for democracy, which resulted in a resounding and unpredicted victory for Congress.

### Election of 1945

The 1935 act served as framework for governing India until Independence in 1947. Although that legislation had foreseen a 'federation of India' governed by an expanded central legislature of 372 elected members, the princely states refused to agree to this plan. As a result, the general election in December 1945 (the last before Independence) covered only 102 seats. Congress again won a majority, and Nehru was installed as leader of an interim government in New Delhi. However, the Muslim League won in all the reserved Muslim constituencies and consolidated its political power. Partition became a certainty.

### Discussion/questions

1. Analyse three specific events that played a key role in the growth of nationalism. Consider, for instance, the Partition of Bengal in 1905, the Amritsar Massacre in 1919, the Simon Commission of 1928, the Salt March of 1930, the Government of India Act 1935 and the Second World War. After analysing three events, identify their common elements and make an argument for those elements as the fundamental elements of nationalism in India.
2. Although Gandhi is justifiably called the 'Father of the nation,' other figures played a key role in achieving independence. These include Tilak, Ambedkar and Naicker. Assess the contribution of each of these men, who often clashed with Gandhi over principles and tactics.

### Reading

Judith M Brown, *Modern India: The Origins of an Asian Democracy* (Oxford, 1994)  
Judith M. Brown, *Gandhi: Prisoner of Hope* (Yale, 1991)  
Burton Stein, *A History of India* (Blackwell, 1998)

## Part X: LATE 20<sup>th</sup> CENTURY

### Overview

Modern India is a nation of contrasts. While a strong central government is enshrined in the Constitution, regional political parties hold the trump card, and peripheral regions, such as Kashmir and the northeast, are still not fully integrated into the nation. The Constitution of 1950 announced that India was a secular nation, but the political landscape is now dominated by Hindu nationalism and Islamic rhetoric. Non-violence was the strategy that achieved independence, but

India fought three wars with Pakistan during the second half of the century, plus another (very brief) war with China, and it sent troops into Sri Lanka during a civil war on that island.

### 1950 Constitution

The Constitution of 1950, based largely on the Government of India Act 1935, established a British-style parliamentary system with a strong centre. Nehru's wish that the constitution be drawn up by a popularly elected assembly was thwarted by Vallabhbhai Patel, who argued for a far less representative body chosen by a limited electorate. This explains why major proposed changes to the 1935 scheme were not passed, such as having provincial (later state) governors elected rather than appointed by the centre. Indeed, the constitution reaffirmed that the government in New Delhi was empowered to replace state governments whenever it wished. The 1947-48 war with Pakistan over Kashmir, concurrent with the drafting of the Constitution, undoubtedly influenced these provisions. The 270-page document also guaranteed freedom of speech, religion and association, plus rights to property, education and the preservation of minority cultures. In this civil rights agenda, Nehru was opposed by Patel but supported by B. R. Ambedkar, the champion of Untouchables/Dalits. But even the combined support of Nehru and Ambedkar was unable to prevent Patel and his conservative allies from retaining colonial-era Hindu and Muslim law codes, instead of more generic human rights. Those rights, it was feared, would lead to demands from low castes and women, which would destabilise the country. Ambedkar resigned from the constitutional assembly in protest, while Nehru decided to achieve reforms through legislation rather than the Constitution.

### Administration

The government of India is divided into executive, legislative and judicial branches. In reality, however, power lies in the legislative branch, with parliament and its ministers. The legislative branch has two houses: the Lok Sabha (People's Assembly) and the Rajya Sabha (Royal Assembly). Members of the Lok Sabha, commonly called MPs, are popularly elected from 552 constituencies in the 29 states, plus 20 MPs from seven Union Territories and 2 MPs from the Anglo-Indian community (the latter are nominated by the President and not elected). As in the UK, the Lok Sabha makes laws, which the Rajya Sabha can amend. The Prime Minister is elected from the Lok Sabha and chooses his or her cabinet of ministers. The President, increasingly a ceremonial role, appoints justices to the Supreme Court and the high courts, as well as state governors. The 245 members of the Rajya Sabha are elected by the state and territorial legislatures, although the President can appoint 12 members, drawn broadly from the arts and business. The Supreme Court in New Delhi has appellate and advisory jurisdictions, as well as original jurisdiction in any case between states or between a state and the central government. Each state has a high court, and each district within a state has a district court. The administrative structure of each state government resembles that of the central government.

### Accession

The strong central government built into the Constitution was a mechanism intended to neutralise the threat of fragmentation latent within an independent India. The day after Independence, the government of India only controlled less than half of the territory and about two-thirds of its population; the princely states had the rest. Most of these 562 princely states acceded to the union immediately, but some of the most powerful needed persuasion. Two of these were Kashmir (Muslim-majority population ruled by a Hindu) and Hyderabad (Hindu-majority population ruled by a Muslim). Military threats in 1948 persuaded Hyderabad, while Kashmir joined the same year after Delhi agreed to send troops to repel an invasion from Pakistan. Travancore and Cochin, a large state in the south, acceded in 1949, followed in the same year by the equally important Rajputana princely states. In the end, all

the princely states were integrated into the fourteen provinces that comprised the Union. Goa, once a Portuguese colony, was annexed in 1961 and became a state in 1989.

### Regionalism

Despite the relative success of accession, the authority of the central government remains undercut by the political regionalism that has fragmented the country. In particular, the 15 or so major language communities (each more than 5 million speakers) became the basis for powerful regional parties who demanded more autonomy and in some cases threatened to secede from the Union. This was the ‘balkanisation’ that Nehru and his allies had tried to avert with a strong centralised state. Nehru did, however, accept the validity of language defining an administrative unit, and he oversaw a process of dividing the large provinces into small states. In 1956, for example, the province of Madras was cut up into four linguistic states: Madras (later Tamil Nadu) for Tamil, Mysore (later Karnataka) for Kannada, Andhra Pradesh (later split into Telangana and Andhra) for Telugu, and Kerala for Malayalam. In 1960, the province of Bombay was split into Maharashtra for Marathi and Gujarat for Gujarati. More recently, several more new states have been carved out of existing ones, this time based more on ethnicity than language. In the northeast, however, several separatist movements and armed insurgencies remain active.

### Bharatiya Janata Party

The rise of the Bharatiya Janata Party (‘The People of India Party’), or the BJP, is revelatory of the recent political history of India. Congress, with Gandhi’s charisma and Nehru’s skill, held the country together during the crucial decades that followed Independence. The post-war consensus, however, broke down in the 1980s (coincidental with the end of the Cold War). The command economy with its Soviet-style five-year plans and state-owned utilities, as well as the colonial-era political system with its opaque bureaucracy and patrician elite, were not fit for purpose. Congress lost its spell, and a new populism filled the vacuum. Rejecting the secularism of the westernised Nehru dynasty, the BJP and its allied organisations tapped into the Hindu nationalism that had been there all along. India was now a ‘Hindu nation’ that celebrated its ancient history and religion. L.K. Advani, leader of the BJP in 1989 elections, toured the country dressed as the mythic hero Rama riding in a (jeep decorated as a) chariot. It is not coincidental that in the previous year (1988) tens of millions of Indians had watched 78 hour-long episodes of the TV adaptation of the Ramayana. Nor is it surprising that a few years later, in 1992, BJP supporters destroyed a 16<sup>th</sup> century mosque that had been built over a Hindu temple. Anti-Muslim riots ensued all over India, leaving thousands dead.

### Discussion/Questions

1. Independence was only the first step in a still-unfinished process of nation-making. Other steps that followed immediately afterward include Partition, the Constitution of 1950, the accession of the princely states, the creation of new states and the annexation of Goa. The border with Pakistan (Kashmir) and the border with China (Arunachal Pradesh) are a source of ongoing instability. Three new states were created (from existing ones) in 2000, and another was created in 2014. At least seven more new states have been proposed.
2. Analyse the Nehru dynasty in the context of both modern Indian history and world history. First describe its significance for India. Did it provide stability or create undemocratic domination? Then assess the Nehru dynasty in comparison with family dynasties elsewhere in 20<sup>th</sup> century world history. Was it, for instance, a repetition of the father-son succession in the Mughal Empire?

### Reading

Ramchandra Guha, *India after Gandhi: The History of the World’s Biggest Democracy* (Harper, 2008)  
Barbara Metcalf and Thomas Metcalf, *A Concise History of Modern India* (Cambridge, 2012)  
Paul R. Brass, *The Politics of India since Independence* (Cambridge, 1994)