

Political Control in South Asia

short biographies of some key people

Chandragupta Maurya ruled from about 322 to 298 BCE. He conquered the Greek rulers in northwest India, the Nanda dynasty near the Ganges River, and the hill tribes of south-central India. Chandragupta was a Buddhist, but most people in his empire were Hindus. His government had a highly organized system of public service. This, in turn, helped develop a strong economy and peaceful trade with other countries.

Ashoka ruled from about 268 to 232 BCE. He was the third ruler of the Mauryan dynasty. At first he was a military leader who conquered many neighboring countries. After a long and bloody war with a breakaway area called Kalinga, Ashoka converted to Buddhism. He spent the last years of his life trying to make a new kind of government based on Buddhist ideas about fairness and peaceful relations with other people.

Maharaja Sri Gupta ruled from about 240 to 280 CE. He was the first ruler of the Gupta dynasty. This dynasty is seen as a golden age of Indian culture, with notable achievements in science, mathematics, architecture, art, and literature. Sri Gupta was a Hindu, but his government was very tolerant of other religions. In fact, he put a tax on Hindu villages in order to build a temple for Chinese Buddhist pilgrims.

Chandragupta II ruled from 380 to 415 CE. The Gupta Empire reached its peak size after he conquered the western part of modern India and Pakistan. Chandragupta continued his father's focus on economy and art. He strengthened the navy to protect trade with Arabia and China. The Gupta rulers were Hindu, but they encouraged other religions. Later rulers were less tolerant, and civil wars led to the end of the dynasty.

Sikandar Lodi was the sultan of Delhi from 1489 to 1517 CE. He was a Persian Muslim who encouraged industry and trade. He conquered several nearby states and made a friendship treaty with others. His government was widely viewed as effective, with little corruption. He encouraged agricultural improvement and had good policies to help poor people, but he also discriminated against the Hindu people.

Muhammad bin Tughlaq ruled from 1324 to 1351 CE. He was a Muslim who spoke Arabic, Persian, and Turkish as well as several local languages of India. After attacks by Mongols, he moved the capital from Delhi (near the Ganges River) south to Daulatabad on the fertile Deccan Plateau ("abad" means "fort" in Persian). That move, plus the cost of a 3-million-soldier army, bankrupted the dynasty and led to its collapse.

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Akbar ruled from 1556 to 1605 CE. He was the third ruler in the Mughal dynasty, and greatly expanded its territory. Akbar was raised as a Muslim, but he encouraged people to follow a religion he called Din-i-Ilahi. This new religion included ideas from Hinduism, Zoroastrianism, and Christianity as well as Islam. He supported science and literature (he built a library with more than 24,000 books!), but he also introduced the use of guns in warfare.

Shah Jahan ruled from 1628 to 1658 CE. He tried to impose Islamic law on the country. To keep the peace he built an army of more than a million soldiers. He drove the Portuguese ships out of their captured ports on the coast, and he expanded trade with the Ottoman empire. His main interest was architecture – he built the famous Red Fort in his capital, and the even more famous Taj Mahal as a tribute to his favorite wife.

Aurangzeb ruled from 1658 to 1707, after putting his father in prison and killing his three brothers. He used Islamic law to suppress other religions, killing Hindu leaders and destroying non-Muslim schools and temples. He added a heavy tax on Hindu merchants and fired non-Muslim workers. In response to his policies, rebellions started in many places. This made it easier for the British to take over South Asia as a colony.

Syed Ahmad Khan studied the Quran in the Mughal court and then studied law at the University of Edinburgh. This background helped him serve as mediator between Indian people and the British colonial government from the 1850s to the 1890s. He criticized British colonial policy, started a scientific society, helped start the first Muslim university in South Asia, and promoted good relations between Muslims and Christians.

Edwin Montagu served from 1917 to 1919 as British Secretary of State for India. He was the second Jew to serve in British Cabinet. As head of the Indian delegation to the Paris Peace Conference, however, Montagu argued that the conference was unfairly “taking sides against Muslims.” He helped craft the Government of India Act of 1919, which led to the transition of India from colony to an independent country.

Mohandas Gandhi was a Hindu of the merchant caste who also went to law school in London. For 20 years, he worked as a lawyer for the Muslim Indian Traders in South Africa. He returned to India in 1915 and became the leader of the Indian National Congress in 1921. Gandhi led campaigns to expand women’s rights, ease poverty, and challenge British laws. His policy of nonviolent resistance helped India become independent from Britain in 1947.