CHAPTER 2

Reshaping India's Political Map

Fig. 2.1. An aerial view of the Qutub Minar complex, Delhi

The Big Questions

1. *How did foreign invasions and the rise of new dynasties reshape India's political boundaries during this period?*
2. *How did Indian society respond to invasions? How did India's economy adapt during times of political instability?*
3. *What impact did this period have on the lives of the people?*

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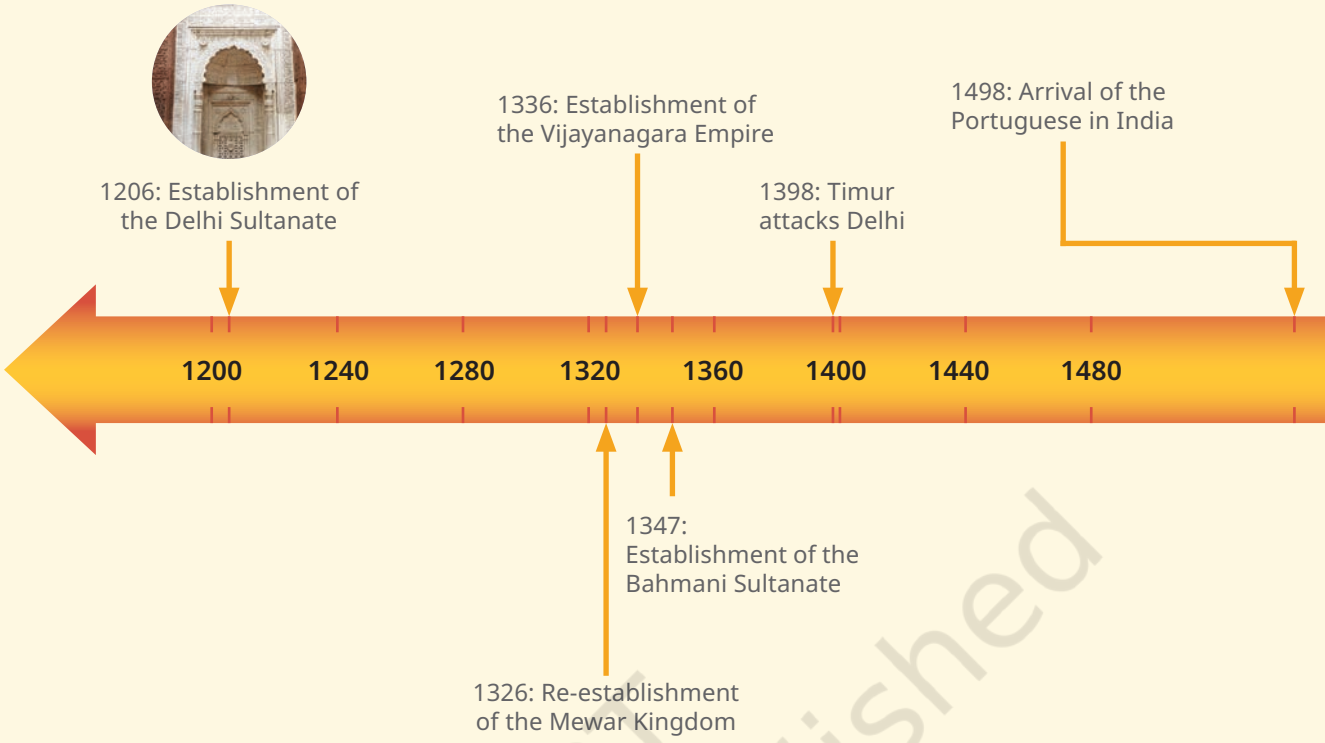
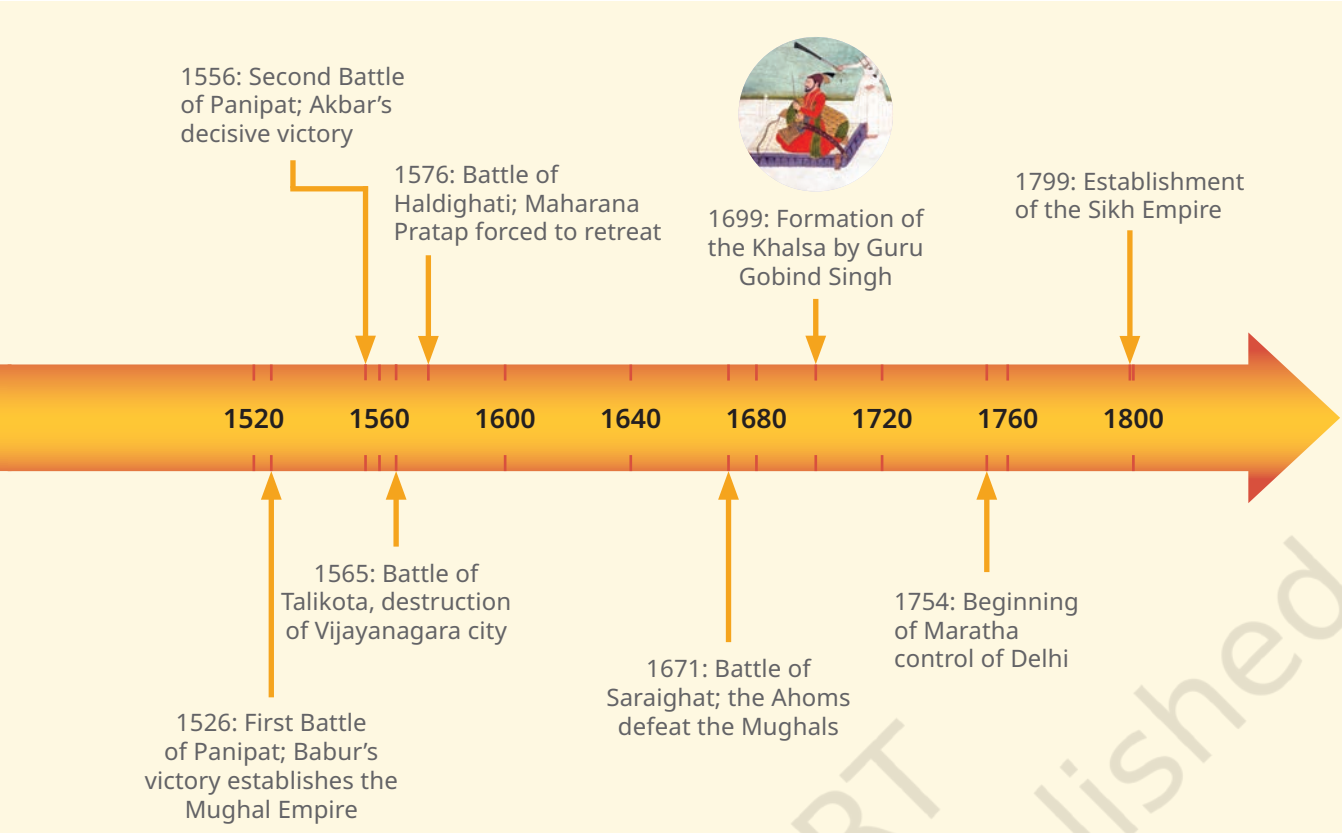


Fig. 2.2.

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). It was once thought to mark a dark age before the development of modern science; but, of course, Europe's and India's histories are very different, so applying the same term 'medieval' to both is not ideal, and historians do not always agree on which period it covers in India. We will sometimes have to use the term 'medieval' but for us it simply means the period from the 11th to the 17th centuries.

In 'Tapestry of the Past' chapters, we have tried to keep as few dates as possible — only those that mark important reference points. You will find it helpful to keep revisiting the timelines in those chapters. Revisit the maps too, as they will help you visualise the geography that was traversed by armies, common people, traders, scholars or spiritual figures.



Spellings, spellings ...

Because of difficulties in transcribing the Persian script in the Roman script, you will find some alternative spellings in parentheses here and there. For instance, 'Khalji' or 'Khilji' are the same. Similarly, we use here the now standard spelling of 'Mughal' spelling, but alternatives such as 'Mughul' or 'Moghul' are still sometimes used.

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.

Let us now explore in this chapter the ever-changing landscape of India from the 13th century onward.

Turkic: Refers to peoples, languages, and cultures historically associated with a vast region stretching across Central Asia, all the way to Turkey and Siberia.

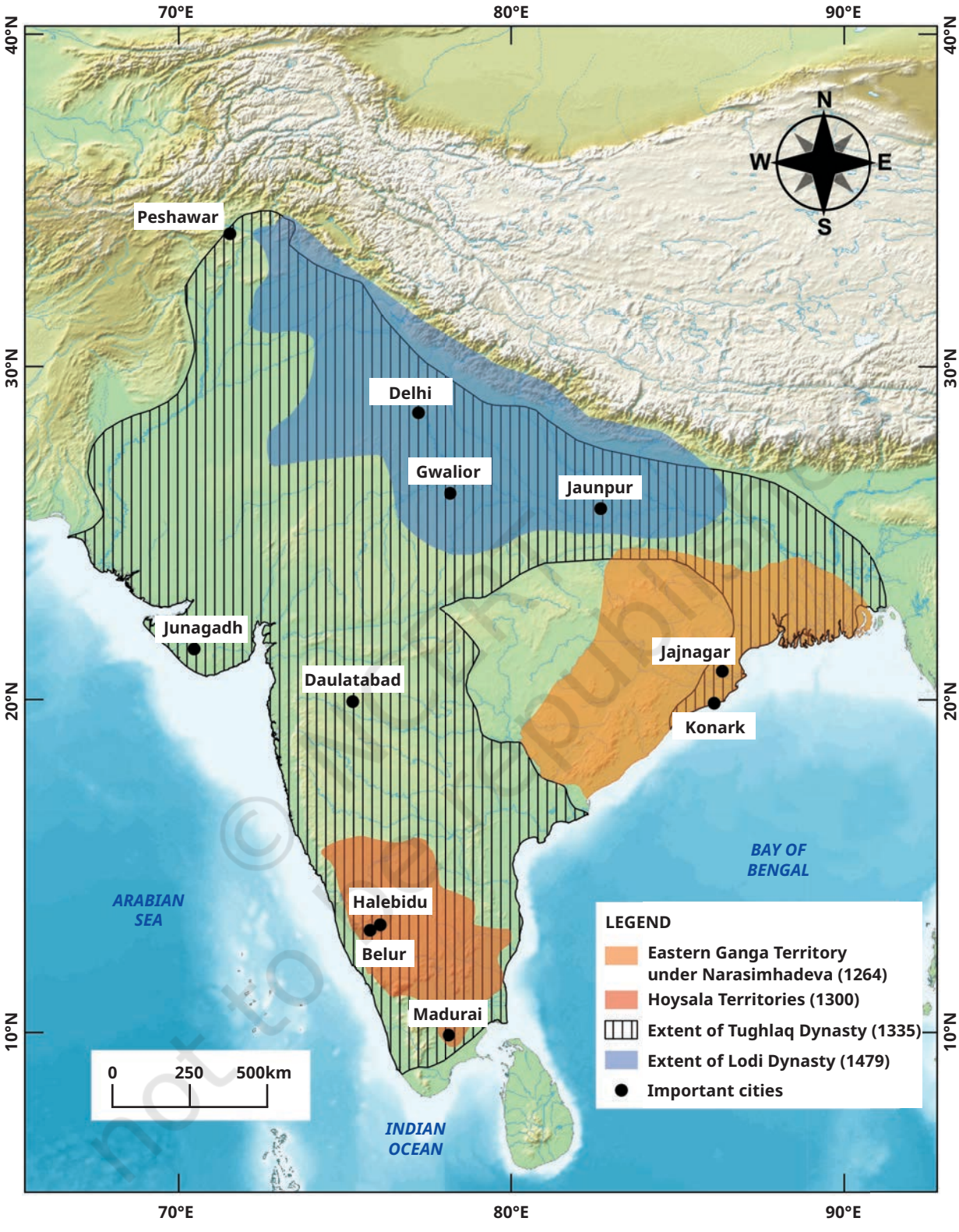


Fig. 2.3. A comparison of the territories under the Tughlaqs and the Lodis (13th to 15th centuries), and regional powers in the south and east.

Fig. 2.4. The Qutub Minar. Fig. 2.5. A section of the Quwwat-ul-Islam ('Might of Islam') mosque in Delhi's Qutub Minar complex; its construction began in Qutub-ud-din Aibak's time (early 13th century) and was completed by later sultans. An inscription states that materials from 27 destroyed Hindu and Jain temples were used in the construction, some of which can be seen here.

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 (Fig. 2.3) 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.

Sultanate: A territory ruled by a 'Sultan' — a title that some Muslim rulers adopted.

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

Fig. 2.6. A coin minted by Ala-ud-din Khilji, which bears the inscription 'Sikander Sani' or 'the second Alexander' in Persian.

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!

LET'S EXPLORE

Looking at Fig. 2.6, why do you think Ala-ud-din Khilji called himself 'the second Alexander'?

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.

LET US EXPLORE

What kind of resources do you think were needed to maintain an army and wage war in those days? Discuss in groups the various types of expenditure involved, from weapons or food for soldiers to animals used in warfare, road construction, etc.

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. 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. 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.

Fig. 2.7. A 19th-century painting depicting Muhammad bin Tughlaq in his court

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 (as enslaved people

provided free labour or were sent away to distant Central Asia to be sold). But plunder, in turn, affected trade networks and agricultural production. 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**.

Iconoclasm: The rejection or destruction of icons or religious images considered idolatrous.

THINK ABOUT IT

Why do we use the term 'image' rather than common terms like 'idol' or 'icon'? The latter two terms are considered pejorative in the context of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, whose orthodox sects condemn 'idolatry' or the worship of 'idols' or 'icons'.

India's classical texts used words like *mūrti, vigraha, pratimā, rūpa,* etc., to designate images, often statues, used for worship in temples or homes. In English, 'image' is a neutral term.

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. 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." Large numbers were killed or enslaved, and the city was left in ruins. Timur soon withdrew from India with huge plunder, leaving chaos behind. In the aftermath, the Lodis emerged and established the last dynasty of the Delhi Sultanate. By then, however, its territory had shrunk considerably in the face of increasing resistance from other states and kingdoms from within India (see Fig. 2.3).

Infidel: Literally, someone who does not share the faith (of a given religion). For medieval Christianity, infidels were Muslims or Pagans; for medieval Islam, infidels were Christians or, in the context of India, Hindus, Buddhists or Jains.

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. 2.3) 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. 2.8. 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?

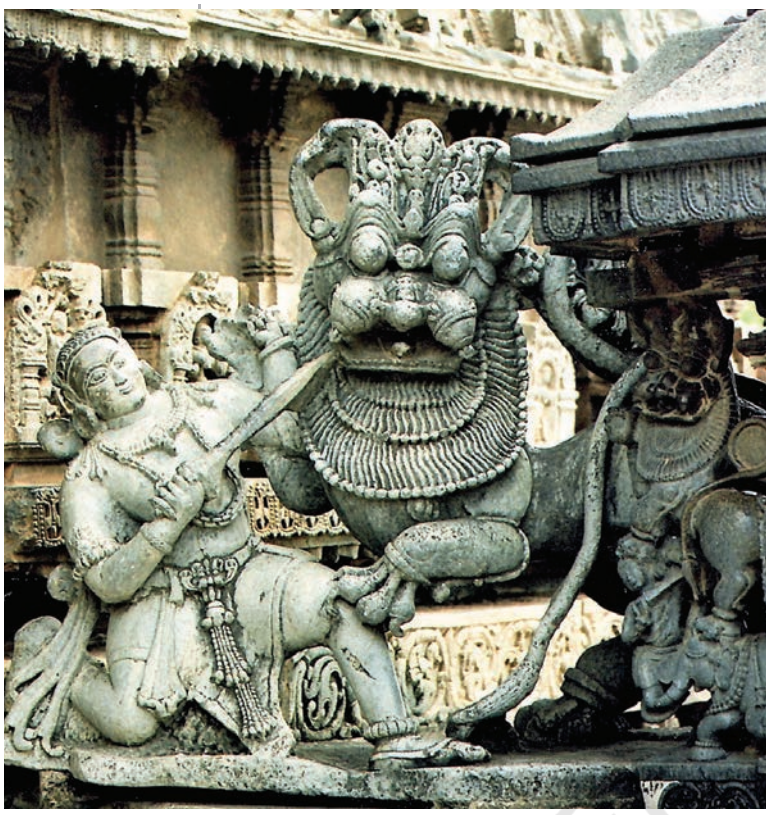


Fig. 2.9 The Hoysalas built magnificent temples, for instance those of Belur (this picture) and Halebidu.

We mentioned earlier 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, see Fig. 2.3) 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 Vijayanagara Empire further south (see below).

DON'T MISS OUT

The sculpture in Fig. 2.9 narrates the story behind the Hoysalas' emblem. Kannada folklore recounts the story of Sala, a young man who fought a lion to save his guru, giving the dynasty its name — 'Hoy (strike)! Sala'.

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.

Rana: A title often used for Rajput kings

Fig. 2.10. A view of the Kumbhalgarh Fort in the Aravalli hills

DON'T MISS OUT

Kumbhalgarh Fort (Fig. 2.10) 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.

LET'S EXPLORE

Why do you think such locations were chosen for many of the medieval forts? Discuss pros and cons. *(Hint: think of issues of strategy, security, vulnerability, etc.)*

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. 2.11. A section of the ruins of Vijayanagara city (present-day Hampi). The large building is the Virūpākṣha temple.

DON'T MISS OUT

According to popular folklore, Harihara and Bukka witnessed a remarkable sight at Hampi (in present-day Karnataka) — a hare turning around and chasing a pack of hounds, symbolising unexpected strength and courage. When they recounted this incident to their guru, Vidyaranya, he interpreted it as a symbol of resilience and bravery, and advised them to establish their capital at that very spot.

To the north of the Vijayanagara Empire (see Fig. 2.12), 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.

THINK ABOUT IT

Have you noticed the term *pati* in titles like 'Gajapati'? *Pati* means 'lord' or 'master' and was commonly used by many ruling dynasties of this period to signify power and stature. The Vijayanagara kings were called 'Narapati', the Bahmani Sultanate rulers 'Ashwapati', and the Maratha rulers 'Chhatrapati' — each title reflecting different aspects of kingship and power. Can you guess what these three terms might mean?

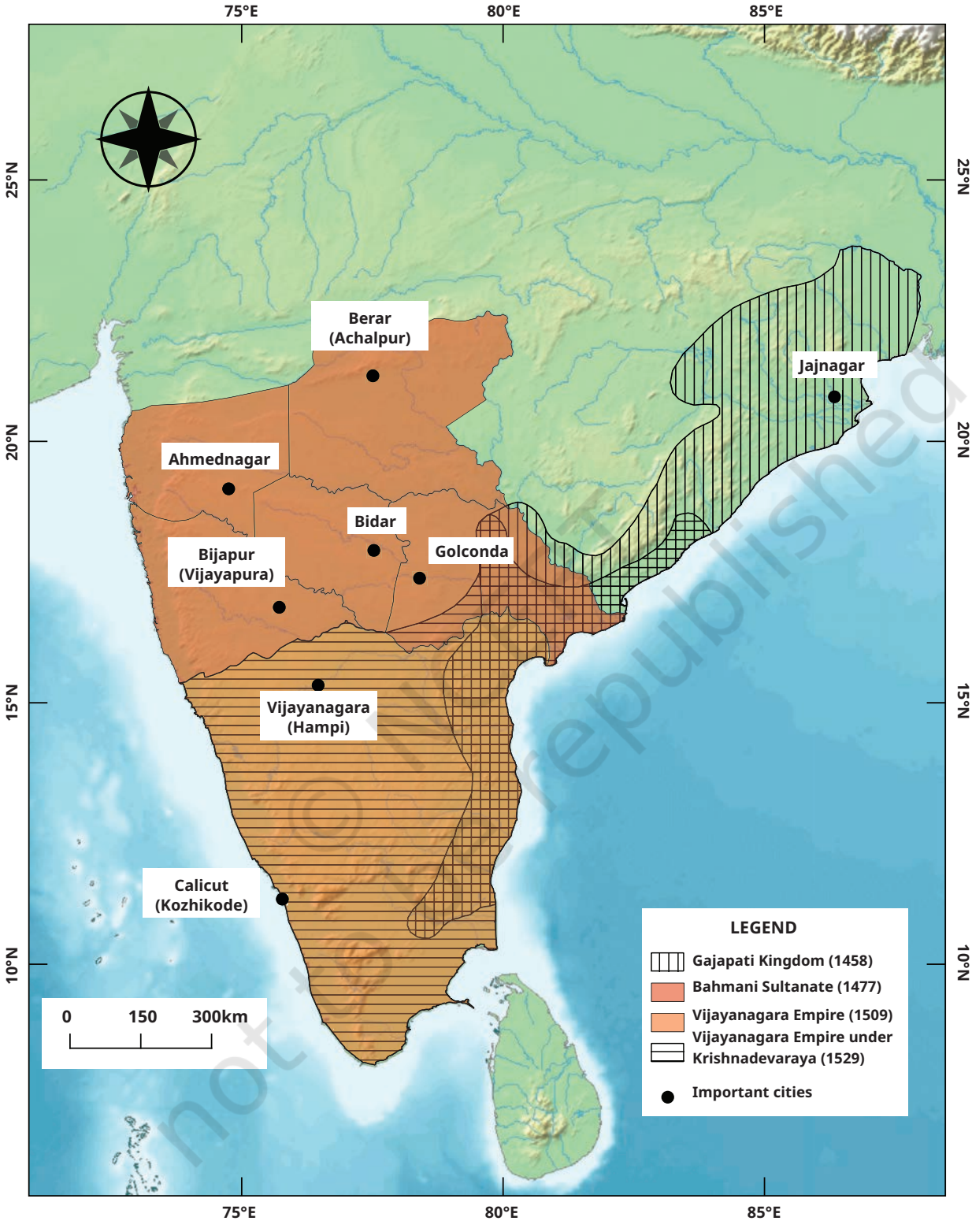


Fig. 2.12. Kingdoms in the Deccan and the Vijayanagara Empire

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, *Āmuktamālyada*, on the story of the Tamil poet-saint Āṇḍāl; one section of the work is a *Rājanīti* ('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.

Fig. 2.13. The mahāmandapa (great hall) of the Vitthala temple; note the grandeur and intricacy of the architecture, in particular the finely sculpted monolithic pillars; when struck, their smaller columns give out different musical notes — hence their name 'musical pillars'!

DON'T MISS OUT

Foreign travellers visited Vijayanagara for trade. Portuguese travellers, in particular, were very well treated, as they came to sell horses and the king did not want them to go and sell those precious horses to enemy kingdoms!

One of them, Domingo Paes, left a long and detailed record of his stay in the Vijayanagara capital. An excerpt: "This city ... seemed to me as large as Rome, and very beautiful to the sight; there are many groves of trees within it, in the gardens of the houses, and many conduits of water which flow into the midst of it, and in places there are lakes... The people in this city are countless in number... This is the best provided city in the world... The streets and markets are full of laden oxen ... you could find in great abundance everything that you wanted."

Fig. 2.14. A panel from the Vitthala temple

LET'S EXPLORE

In Fig. 2.14, what elements do you observe? What do they tell you about life then? *(Hint: observe the weapons, the animals, the activities.)*

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.

Fig. 2.15. The battle of Panipat as depicted in a copy of the Baburnama. Note the use of cannons.

Babur and India

Babur left a candid autobiography of great historical value, *Baburnama* ('Babur's Memoirs'). In it, he comes out as cultured and intellectually curious, with a keen appreciation for architecture, poetry, animals (birds in particular, many of which he lists in some detail) and flora (fruit trees especially). But he was also a brutal and ruthless conqueror, slaughtering entire populations of cities, enslaving women and children, and taking pride in erecting 'towers of skulls' made from the slaughtered people of plundered cities.

Babur was nostalgic about Central Asia and found India to be a 'country of few charms'; at the same time, he acknowledged, "Hindustan is a large country and has masses of gold and silver. ... Through the rainy season, the air is remarkably fine, not to be surpassed for healthiness and charm. ... There are countless artisans and workmen of every sort in Hindustan." Perhaps for the last reasons, especially India's wealth, he decided to stay and build his empire in India rather than return to Central Asia.

THINK ABOUT IT

What strikes you in Babur's impressions of India? Discuss in groups.

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* (see box). 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."

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 followed his predecessors in this thought of his: "A monarch should be ever intent on conquest, otherwise his enemies rise in arms against him." As his empire grew (Fig. 2.16), he increasingly used political strategies to stabilise it; he entered into marriage alliances with princesses of neighbouring kingdoms, welcomed Rajput and regional leaders into his court, abolished the *jizya*, and promoted the doctrine of *sulh-i-kul* — literally, 'peace with all' or tolerance of all faiths. Through interfaith dialogues, appointment

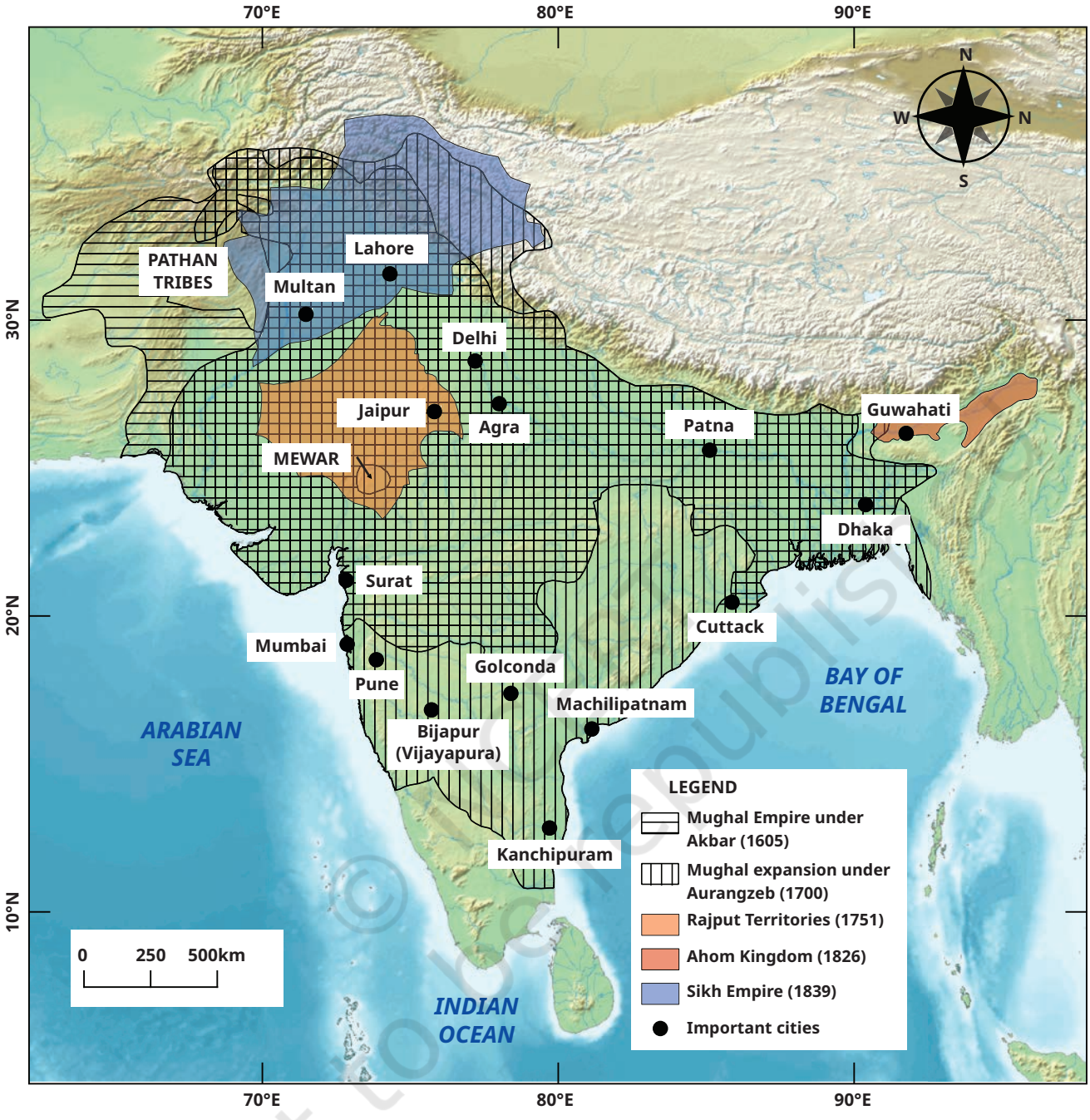


Fig. 2.16. The Mughals and the rise of regional powers at different periods.

of Hindu officials in high positions and other bold reforms, Akbar expanded and stabilised his empire, even gaining the support of many Rajput rulers. His court historian and biographer Abul Fazl recorded him as stating, "Formerly I persecuted men into conformity with my faith and deemed it Islam.

As I grew in knowledge, I was overwhelmed with shame. Not being a Muslim myself, it was unmeet [i.e., inappropriate] to force others to become such. What constancy is to be expected from proselytes [i.e., converted people] on compulsion?"

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. 2.17. Painting showing Akbar in his court receiving scholars, including two Jesuits (dressed in black).

THINK ABOUT IT

Why do you think Akbar employed different strategies to expand his empire, while the earlier rulers of Delhi relied mostly on military might?

LET'S EXPLORE

Compare the maps in Figs. 2.3, 2.12 and 2.16. What differences do you notice? What is the 'reshaping' that has occurred?

Fig. 2.18. The five-storied 'Panch Mahal' at Fatehpur Sikri, a city built by Akbar near present-day Agra

Despite being illiterate, Akbar became keen to explore Persian and Indian texts, and showed great interest in classical Indian thought and often invited scholars to his court (Fig. 2.17). He established a 'house of translation' at Fatehpur Sikri where he had major Sanskrit texts translated into Persian, including the Mahābhārata (*Razmnama* in Persian, or the 'Book of War'), the Rāmāyaṇa (with 176 beautiful miniature paintings), the *Bhagavad Gītā*, and the *Pañchatantra*.

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.

Fig. 2.19. A miniature painting illustrating the Persian translation of the Rāmāyaṇa and depicting the well-known episode of Rāma chasing the golden deer.

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.

THINK ABOUT IT

We saw above that Delhi sultans' average reign lasted about nine years. This figure becomes 27 years in the case of Mughal emperors up to Aurangzeb; and 16 years if we consider all Mughal rulers, up to the end of the empire in the 19th century. What do you make of these numbers of years of reign?

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 (see Fig. 2.16), 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. 2.20. Aurangzeb in court, holding a hawk, with one of his sons standing in front of him (17th-century painting).

Some scholars argue that Aurangzeb's motives were primarily political, that is, to establish and strengthen his empire's dominance; they also give examples of grants and assurances of protection he gave to some temples. While politics did play a part in his decisions, Aurangzeb's own farmans (or firmans, i.e., edicts) make his personal religious motive clear too. In 1669, for instance, he ordered governors of all provinces "to demolish schools and temples of the infidels and put down their teachings and religious practices." Temples at Banaras (present-day Varanasi), Mathura, Somnath, among many others, were destroyed, as well as Jain temples and Sikh gurudwaras. This aspect of Aurangzeb was also visible in his persecution of Muslims of other sects, including Sufis, and of Zoroastrians (the religion of Parsis in India, originally from Persia).

LET'S EXPLORE

In his last letters to two of his sons, Aurangzeb wrote, "I came alone and am going away alone. I know not who I am and what I have been doing. ... I have not done well for the country and the people, and of the future there is no hope. I was helpless [in life] and I am departing helpless." What do these words tell us about Aurangzeb? How do you feel about them?

THINK ABOUT IT

Some of the invaders and rulers mentioned above committed terrible deeds and atrocities. Many more could have been mentioned. As the 'Note on History's Darker Chapters' on page 20 makes clear, we must keep in mind that this is about people in the past, not people of today. We need to know the facts of the past, and the victims of these atrocities deserve our respect and remembrance. But it is important to keep in mind that we, today, bear no responsibility for actions of individuals hundreds of years ago.

Resistance to the Mughals

Let us survey some of the major rebellions that ended up eroding the Mughal power (keeping the special case of the Marathas for the next chapter).

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 **Gond**s, 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.

Fig. 2.21. An artist's impression of Rani Durgavati.

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.

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

Fig. 2.23. An artist's impression of the Battle of Haldighati (from Udaipur palace)

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 (Fig. 2.23), 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. 2.22).

Guerrilla warfare: A style of fighting where small groups with knowledge of the terrain carry out surprise attacks and ambushes to defeat bigger armies.

Fig. 2.22. The Mewar emblem, with a Bhil warrior on the left

While some Rajput states eventually allied with the Mughals — through diplomacy and marriage alliances — some, especially Mewar, did not accept Mughal dominance. During Aurangzeb's reign, several Rajput nobles rebelled, including Durga Das Rathore of Marwar, who fought to protect the independence of Jodhpur. Mughal authority thus remained limited in Rajasthan.

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.

LET'S EXPLORE

Discuss in class how the *paik* system affected the daily lives of the people in the Ahom kingdom, both in terms of challenges and benefits, and helped the king manage both the army and the economy.

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.

DON'T MISS OUT

Ram Singh, the general of the Mughal army, praised the Ahom warriors in these terms: "Every Assamese soldier is expert in rowing boats, in shooting arrows, in digging trenches, and in wielding guns and cannons. I have not seen such specimens of versatility in any other part of India."

LET'S EXPLORE

How did the Ahoms use the rivers, hills and forests of Assam to their advantage? Can you think of ways in which the geography helped them build defences and fight wars?

Fig. 2.24. A plaque commemorating the Battle of Saraighat, with an Ahom boat in the foreground (Saraighat War Memorial Park).

Fig. 2.25. 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 Onkār*); 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.

DON'T MISS OUT

In the context of this chapter, 'Punjab' refers to the vast region now split across India and Pakistan.

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. 2.26. Miniature painting of Guru Gobind Singh

DON'T MISS OUT

Do you know what the Gurudwara Sis Gunj Sahib in Chandni Chowk — the famous shopping area in Delhi — signifies? In Sikhism, a gurudwara is a place of worship. This one marks the site where Guru Tegh Bahadur, the ninth Sikh Guru, was beheaded by Aurangzeb in 1675. This historic Gurdwara is uniquely honoured by the Sikh Regiment, which has saluted it before the President in the Republic Day parade each year since 1979. It stands as a powerful symbol of faith and sacrifice in Indian history.

THINK ABOUT IT

- → Why do you think Guru Tegh Bahadur endured torture rather than convert? Why did he think his sacrifice would make a difference?
- → What values did the Sikh Gurus and the Khalsa embody?
- → How are they relevant in today's world?

As the Mughal Empire declined, especially under the onslaughts of the Marathas (see next chapter), several Sikh confederacies emerged in the Punjab region; they were ultimately unified through the efforts of **Maharaja Ranjit Singh** at the turn of the 19th century. Ranjit Singh's military acumen, diplomatic skill and religious tolerance allowed him to establish a strong, centralised

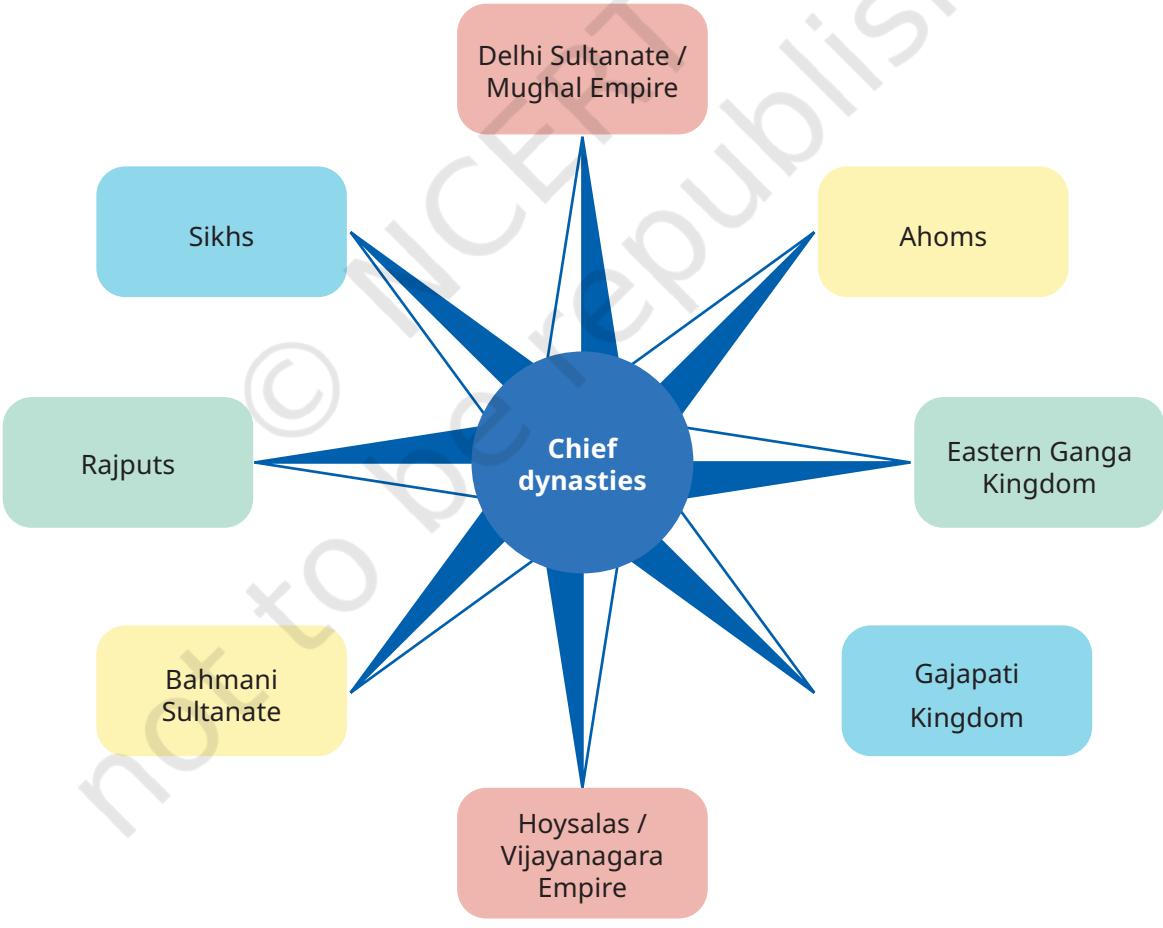


Fig. 2.27. This graphic sums up the chief dynasties involved in this chapter, with a rough indication of their geographical locations.

Sikh Empire which spanned much of the Northwest, including parts of Kashmir. Till the mid-19th century, this empire resisted both Mughal remnants and later British expansion.

Administering India

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 (*iqtadars*) 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.

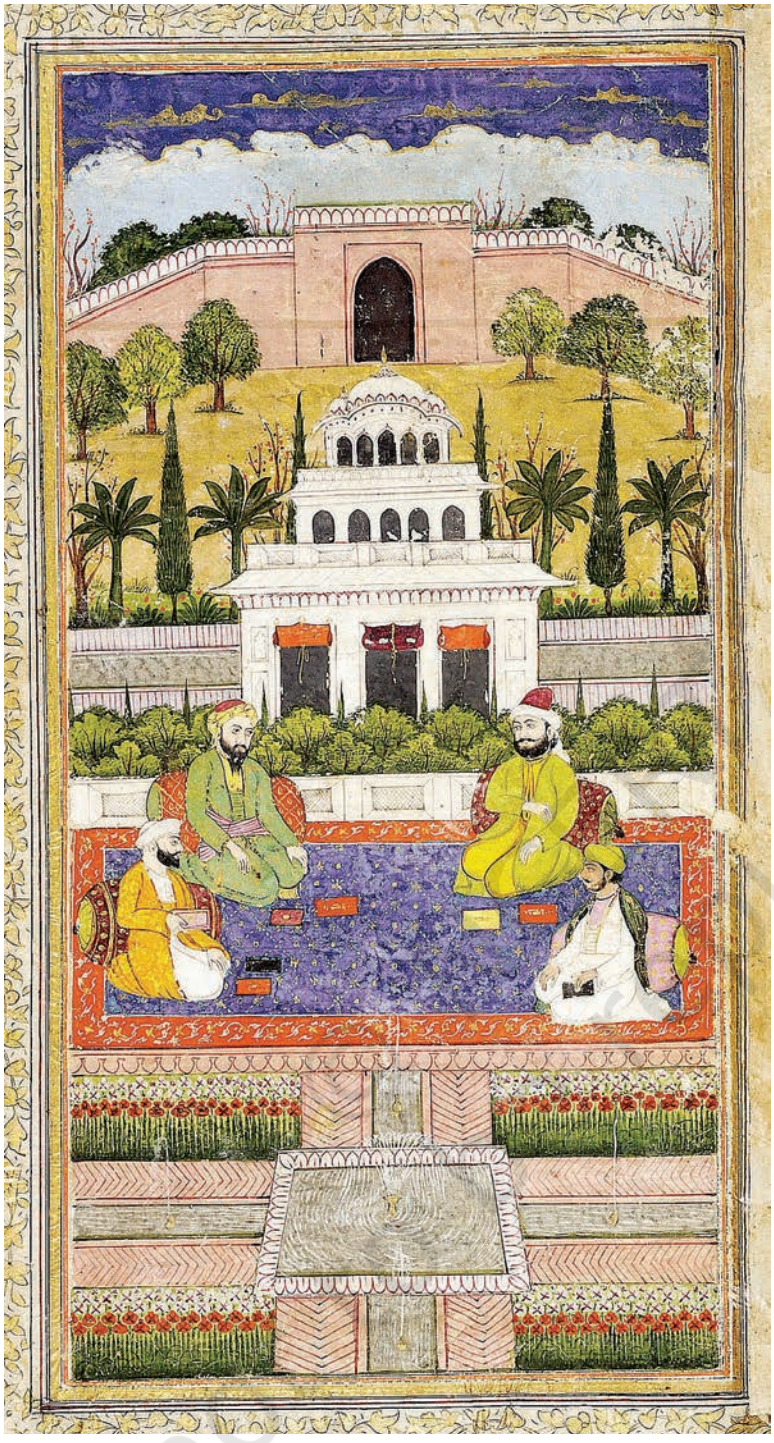


Fig. 2.28. Manuscript painting of Abul Fazl, seated on a terrace with his completed chronicles before him

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.

Todar Mal, Akbar's finance minister, introduced an efficient revenue system. He made detailed surveys for crop yields and prices, and determined prices for each crop on the basis of that information. He also initiated a systematic survey of the land in the entire empire which boosted revenue collection and strengthened the state apparatus.

We will see a different kind of administration, that of the Marathas, in the next chapter.

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 *śhreṇis* (guilds), *jātis* (professionally defined communities), and systems for credit — the Subcontinent remained one of the wealthiest regions in the world.

The Sultanate period saw some progress in infrastructural works, especially roads in north India, bridges, a few canals and other irrigation works, apart from the creation of new cities, all of which expanded considerably during the Mughal period. Coins in several metals and denominations were introduced as currency. The Mughals will use a different system, with a *rupaya* of silver and a *dam* of copper.

Fig. 2.29. A Persian wheel used to draw water from wells or tanks to irrigate fields.

Fig. 2.30. A Vijayanagara land grant, inscribed on a copper plate, the equivalent of modern-day property deeds.

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. The expansion of irrigation systems increased agricultural productivity, allowing for the production of multiple crops, including both food (rice, wheat, barley, pulses, sugarcane, spices, etc.) and non-food items (cotton, which fed a thriving textile production, silk, wool, dyes, timber, jute, etc.). Let us note that agriculture output varied from region to region and period to period; the peasantry suffered several severe famines in this period, with relief depending upon the particular ruler's benevolence.

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. Indian goods were exported through coastal and riverside towns such as Calicut, Mangalore, Surat, Masulipatnam or Hooghly. India imported much less than it exported; import products included silk, horses, metals, and all kinds of luxury goods. Merchants from Arabia, Persia (now Iran), and Central Asia settled in Indian ports, contributing to the bustling trade activity.

The *hundi* system also enabled merchants to transfer funds across political boundaries without physically transporting currency, making them less vulnerable to plunder. Trader communities, such as the Marwaris, became adept at operating across different political regimes, developing parallel systems of credit and trust that functioned independently of official structures.

DON'T MISS OUT

A *hundi* was a written instruction to make payment to an individual. It could be carried across political borders and enabled financial transactions without the need to carry currency — a precursor to modern banking. These systems worked across trade networks without the participation of the ruling classes.

Temples as centres of economic activity

Many temples were more than centres for worship, learning, social interaction or performing arts. They also created ecosystems with bustling markets; ruling classes donated land and wealth (*dāna*) to temple deities, held in trust by temple managers who developed community infrastructure (irrigation systems, tanks, etc.) and pilgrim accommodations (*dharmaśhālās* and *chhatrams*). Temples provided merchants with credit and funded internal as well as maritime trade.

While early periods saw prosperity, the late 1600s witnessed economic stress. Peasants were often left with a small share of their produce after taxes and payments to intermediary parties. This caused many to lose their land and become bonded labourers.

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.

At the level of the common people, there were instances of clashes, especially over sacred sites that had been desecrated or destroyed under the rulers' sanction. But by and large, people of different faiths and communities lived peacefully side by side, economically dependent on each other.

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.

Through it all, India endured, economically prosperous on the whole but often politically unstable. During this period of frequent reshaping of the political map, India faced serious challenges, but survived. It is a tale not only of hardship but also of resilience — through the sword when the occasion demanded, but also through fresh creation in art, literature, spirituality, and timeless values.

Before we move on ...

- 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.

Questions and activities

1. Compare the political strategies of the Delhi Sultanate and the Mughals. What similarities and differences existed between them?
2. Why did kingdoms like the Vijayanagara Empire and the Ahom Kingdom manage to resist conquest for a longer time compared to others? What geographical, military, and social factors contributed to their success?
3. Imagine you are a scholar in the court of Akbar or Krishnadevaraya. Write a letter to a friend describing the politics, trade, culture, and society you are witnessing.
4. How come Akbar, a ruthless conqueror in his young days, grew tolerant and benevolent after some years? What could have led to such a change?
5. What might have happened if the Vijayanagara Empire had won the Battle of Talikota? Imagine and describe how it could have changed the political and cultural history of south India.
6. Many values promoted by early Sikhism, including equality, *seva*, and justice, remain relevant today. Select one of these values and discuss how it remains relevant in contemporary society.
7. Imagine you are a trader in a port city (Surat, Calicut or Hooghly). Describe the scenes you see as regards goods, people you trade with, movement of ships, etc.

Noodles

*‘Noodles’ is our abbreviation for ‘Notes and Doodles’!