

Chapter 2

A Brief History of India

Civilization in India began around 2500 B.C. when the inhabitants of the Indus River Valley began commercial and agricultural trade. Around 1500 B.C., the Indus Valley civilization began to decline, likely due to environmental changes. At this time, Aryan tribes migrated into the Indian subcontinent and flourished in the Ganges River valley. Throughout ancient and medieval India, a number of kingdoms ruled the country and specifically in the fourth and fifth centuries AD, Northern India was unified under the Gupta Dynasty and this period is referred to as “India’s Golden Age,” where Hindu culture, language and politics reached unprecedented growth. Islam expanded across India over the next 500 years and in the tenth and eleventh centuries, Turks and Afghans invaded India and established capitals in Delhi.

In the sixteenth century, successors of Genghis Khan swept across the Khyber Pass and established the Mughal Dynasty, which lasted for over 200 years in India. South India was dominated by Hindu Chola and Vijayanagar Dynasties between the eleventh and fifteenth centuries. The Hindu and Muslim systems of North and South India mingled and culturally influenced each other, leaving a lasting impact in the region.

The first British colony of India was established in 1619 in Surat (in present day Gujarat). Later in the century, the East India Company opened trading stations at Madras (present day Chennai), Bombay (present day Mumbai), and Calcutta (present day Kolkata). For the next 200 years, the British expanded their influence and by the 1850s, Britain controlled most of India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh. In 1857, a rebellion in North India, referred to as India’s First War of Independence led by mutinous Indian soldiers (it is also called the Sepoy Rebellion) caused the British Parliament to transfer all political power from the East India Company to the British Crown. Great Britain began controlling most of India directly while managing the rest through treaties with local rulers.

Indian Independence

In the late 1800s, Indian counselors were appointed to advise the British viceroy and participate in legislative councils, enabling Indians to take initial steps towards self-government. Around 1920, independence advocate Mohandas K. Gandhi (also called Mahatma or Great Soul) transformed the India National Congress Party by organizing mass civil disobedience movements to protest continued British colonial rule. For his role in India's independence, Gandhi is officially honored as the Father of the Nation and his birthday, October 2, is a national holiday.

On August 15, 1947, India became independent from British rule along with Pakistan. Hostility between Hindus and Muslims had led the British to partition British India, creating East and West Pakistan, where there were Muslim majorities.

Pakistan's independence sparked unprecedented and prolonged riots across India and Pakistan, resulting in millions of Indian Muslims migrating to Pakistan and millions of Pakistani Hindus and Sikhs migrating to India. Approximately 500,000 people died as a result of a riot that broke out between Sikhs, Hindus, and Muslims when pre-partition Punjab and Bengal was divided. Furthermore, disputes arose over several states including Kashmir and Jammu whose ruler had illegally entered India following an invasion by Pashtun tribesmen from Pakistan. This led to the First Kashmir War in 1948 that ended in Pakistan administering one-third of the state.

In 1971, Bangladesh, formerly East Pakistan and East Bengal, seceded from Pakistan and became its own country.

Post Independence

Jawaharlal Nehru became the country's first prime minister and India became a republic within the Commonwealth after disseminating its constitution on January 26, 1950. After independence, the Congress Party, the party of Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru, primarily ruled India under the leadership of Nehru and then his daughter, Indira Gandhi, and grandson, Rajiv Gandhi, with the exception of two brief periods in the 1970 and 1980s.

Prime Minister Nehru governed India until his death in 1964. He was succeeded by Lal Bahadur Shastri, who also died in office. In 1966, power passed to Nehru's daughter, Indira Gandhi, who served as PM from 1966 to 1977. In 1975, with an onslaught of serious political and economic problems in the country, Mrs. Gandhi declared a state of emergency and suspended many civil liberties.

Seeking justification from the public for her policies, she called for elections in 1977, only to be defeated by Moraji Desai, who headed the Janata Party, a coalition of 5 opposition parties. In 1980, Indira Gandhi returned to power. In June 1984, under her order, the Indian army forcefully entered the Golden Temple in

Punjab, the most sacred Sikh shrine, to remove armed insurgents present inside the temple. She was assassinated on October 31, 1984 in retaliation for this operation. She was India's first and, to date, only female prime minister. Her son Rajiv was chosen by the Congress Party to take her place and his government was eventually brought down in 1989 on allegations of corruption. In the 1989 elections, the Congress party lost to the Janata Dal, a union of opposition parties including the Hindu-nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the Communist Party. This loose coalition collapsed shortly afterwards and national elections were held again in 1991.

Present Day

On May 27, 1991, while campaigning in Tamil Nadu on behalf of the Congress Party, Rajiv Gandhi was assassinated, reportedly by Tamil extremists from Sri Lanka. In the elections, Congress returned to power by putting together a coalition under the leadership of Prime Minister Narasimha Rao. This Congress-led government served a full 5 year term and initiated the 1991 economic liberalization and reform that opened India to global trade and investment.

The 1991 elections gave no single political party a majority; the India National Congress (INC) formed a minority government under Prime Minister P.V. Narasimha Rao who completed a five-year term. Between 1996 and 1998 there was instability in the federal government. The BJP formed a government briefly in 1996, followed by the United Front coalition that excluded the BJP and the INC. In 1998, the BJP formed the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) with several other parties and became the first non-Congress government to complete a full 5 year term run under the leadership of Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee. In 2004, the INC won the largest number of Lok Sabha (the directly elected lower house of Parliament) seats and formed a coalition called the United Progressive Alliance (UPA). Prime Minister Manmohan Singh was sworn in on May 22, 2004, and is currently serving his second five-year term. In the 2009 Lok Sabha elections, the INC party won again with an unprecedented majority.

Family Politics

While democracy is built on the ideal that any man or woman can be elected, in India, political analysts suggest it helps to be part of a political family to win an election. The Nehru-Gandhi dynasty that has governed the Congress Party since independence is India's version of the iconic American political dynasty, the Kennedy family.

India's politics can sometimes be seen as democracy to a fault with frequent elections, leadership changes and over 1,000 registered national and regional

political parties. But internally most of the major parties, especially the Congress Party, are not quite democratic with party leaders selecting candidates, often their own relatives, and not holding primary elections and many argue that nepotism has deeply infiltrated India's political system. Political families are deep-rooted at every level of government. According to the New York Times, "at least nine of the 32 members of Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's cabinet either descended from political families or have children seeking or holding office."

Even though Indian politicians have a high turnover rate, analysts suggest Indian voters prefer a familiar family pedigree, due to cultural reverence for the family name and also because the political landscape is so overcrowded that voters prefer to vote for a "brand" name they are familiar with. Several of the royal families who ruled over feudal states are still today heavily evolved into political families.

Political System

According to India's constitution, the country is a "sovereign socialist secular democratic republic" with a parliamentary system of government. India is governed by a constitution, which was adopted in 1949 and came into force in 1950. There are 28 states and seven Union territories in the country. The system of government in states resembles that of the Union. In the states, the governor, as the representative of the president, is the head executive, but real executive power rests with the chief minister who heads the Council of Ministers. The Council of Ministers of a state is collectively responsible to the elected legislative assembly of the state.

President: The president is the constitutional head of the Union and is elected by members of an electoral college consisting of elected members of both houses of parliament and legislative assemblies of the states. However, real executive power lies with the Council of Ministers lead by the prime minister. The Council of Ministers is collectively responsible to the Lok Sabha, the house of the people.

Vice-president: The vice-president is elected by the Electoral College and holds office for 5 years. They are ex-officio chairman of the Rajya Sabha.

Council of Ministers: The Council of Ministers is comprised of cabinet ministers, ministers of states and deputy ministers. The prime minister communicates all decisions of the Council of Ministers related to administration of affairs of the Union to the president. Generally, each department has an officer or secretary that advises the ministers on policy matters and general administration.

Cabinet Secretariat: The Cabinet Secretariat plays an important coordinating role in decision-making at the highest level and operates under the supervision of the prime minister. The legislative arm of the Union, the Parliament, consists of the President, Rajya Sabha and Lok Sabha. All legislation requires consent of both houses of Parliament. In the case of financial legislation, the Lok Sabha has the ruling vote.

Rajya Sabha: The Rajya Sabha consists of 245 members, of which 233 represent states and union territories and 12 members are nominated by the president. Elections to the Rajya Sabha are indirect—members are elected by the elected members of legislative assemblies of the concerned states.

Lok Sabha: the Lok Sabha is composed of representatives of the people chosen by direct election. The term of the Lok Sabha is 5 years.

Party recognition: If a political party is recognized in four or more states, it is considered a national party. The most prominent national parties in India include: the Congress Party, Bharatiya Janata Party, Janata Dal, and the Communist Party of India. There are over 1,000 registered national and regional parties in the country.

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