

Premium TimeMaps Unit Slideshow

Medieval India

Slideshow Commentary

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Introduction

This activity can be used as a stand-alone exercise, as an introduction to this topic in world history; or as a wrap up/reinforcement exercise.

The slideshow can also be used by students in their project work. For this they will need to access the resource themselves, as well as the student commentary (or a printout of it). This will require a multi-user licence.

For each slide, this commentary mostly follows the same formula:

1. Slide number and date

2. Introductory paragraph (in bold)

This seeks to encapsulate in a sentence or two what's going on in the map.

3. Bullet points

One or more bullet points, giving very brief points of interest in the map, or in the period it covers.

4. Additional note(s)

For all slides there are additional notes. These give more in-depth support to the bullet points. Much of the information these contain may be superfluous to your needs, especially if you are covering the topic quickly. However, we have included it so that it is there for you if you want it.

We suggest that, prior to using the Presentation with your class, you go through these additional notes and highlight any you wish to use.

A suggestion:

To keep your students more engaged (and, by the way, if your students are not engaged or benefitting from these maps, then let us know and we'll refund your money!), why not start each new map with a question, such as, "How is this map different from the previous one?"

Commentary

When using the Sideshow in class it might be helpful to print these notes out.

Map 1: 565 CE

By the mid-6th century the Gupta empire, the last of the great states of ancient India, had vanished.

- The Indian subcontinent was now covered by **numerous smaller kingdoms** (note 1).
- By this time, the **Hindu** belief-system was emerging (note 2).
- India was well integrated into the **international trade networks** of the day (note 3).

Additional notes

1. The end of the last great empire of Ancient India

The early 6th century saw the rapid decline of the **Gupta empire**.

The power of the Gupta emperors was weakened by devastating raids by the **Huns** from central Asia. Kings and princes who had been subordinate to the Gupta emperors took the opportunity to break away. By the time that the Hun attacks were weakening, from the mid-6th century CE, Gupta power had vanished. The whole of the Indian subcontinent was now fragmented into numerous smaller kingdoms.

In ancient times, some states had been ruled by oligarchies of nobles. These have been termed “republics” by some modern historians. Whatever they were, such states were no longer heard of after the Gupta period.

The map shows labels for some of the leading kingdoms throughout India at this time, but there were many more. We know very little about the majority of them, and for the ones we do know about we often only have a hazy idea of where their borders were. In fact, most of the larger kingdoms were not centrally organized states, but more like feudal confederations, with power devolving from over-kings to under-kings, and then down to subordinate princes and nobles.

2. Hinduism

By this time, the ancient tribal religion of the Vedic period had been transformed. In response to the challenge of **Buddhism** and **Jainism**, it had absorbed local cults and new ways of worship to become more personal and emotional in its practices. It had evolved into a religious tradition which we would recognize today as an early form of **Hinduism**.

3. India's economy

As with all pre-modern societies, the great majority of people were engaged in agriculture. They farmed small plots of land, the surplus going to landowners.

For centuries the subcontinent had been crossed by north-south and east-west **trade routes**. Long-distance trade was carried out by means of coastal shipping and river transport. Inland, large **caravans** of pack-animals, well-defend against brigands, carried most of the goods.

Indian Ocean trade

The past few centuries have seen the rise of maritime trade in the **Indian Ocean**. Initially, with the **Roman Empire** at the height of its prosperity, this had predominantly been with the west; Indian products such as **cotton textiles**, **spices** and **gems** had been exchanged for **silver**.

With the rise of states in **South East Asia** and the expansion of **China's** economy under the Tang dynasty, however, the Indian Ocean trade pivoted more to the east. In this, Indian products were traded for spices from the East Indies and **silks** from China.

The seaborne trade of the Indian Ocean was aided by the development of a type of ship superbly adapted to the **Monsoon** climate of the region. This was the **dhow**. Its origins are shrouded in mystery, but Indian woods are well suited to dhow construction and dhow design may well have had an Indian origin.

Long-distance trade routes also reached overland, westward into Afghanistan and Iran and northwards to connect with the **Silk Road** in central Asia. This trade had led to the rise of communities of **Jews** and **Parsees** (Persians) appearing in Indian cities and handling much of this international commerce.

Map 2: 647 CE

In the first half of the 7th century much of India came under the domination of two powerful states, Harsha's empire and the kingdom of the Chalukyas.

- A warrior-emperor **Harsha Vardhana** conquered the whole of northern India (note 1).
- At the same time, a vigorous ruler called Pulakeshin II built up the large **Chalukya** kingdom in the Deccan region of central India (note 2).
- At this time a Chinese monk called **Xuanzang** visited India and left an account of his travels (note 3).

Additional notes

1. Harsha Vardhana

Harsha launched a series of campaigns from his capital, **Kanauj**, and brought the whole of northern India under his control. He did not create a centralized state, but in traditional Indian practice he made conquered kings pay him homage as their overlord.

His long reign lasted from 606 to 647.

2. The Chalukyas

While Harsha was carving out his empire in the north, a vigorous ruler called **Pulakeshin II Chalukya** was building up a large kingdom in the Deccan.

He successfully repulsed Harsha's attacks on his realm. He conquered the entire middle band of the Indian peninsula, from the west to east coasts.

Pulakeshin was however unable to overcome the **Pallava** kingdom to the south. Indeed, the Pallavas went on the attack against Pulakeshin, who was killed in the fighting, though his son was able to force the Pallavas back to their own borders.

3. Xuanzang

It was during Harsha's reign that a Buddhist monk, Xuanzang, travelled to northern India from **China** to seek out religious texts. His aim was to purify and strengthen **Buddhism** in his Chinese homeland.

Xuanzang left a useful account of his travels, as a result of which we know more about northern India at this time than in many other periods. He found Buddhism in decline in some areas, but still thriving in others. He studied for two years or more at the great Buddhist university at **Nalanda**, in northeast India. When he returned to China he took many Buddhist texts, plus some relics, and was to have an important role in reforming Buddhist teaching there.

Map 3: 675 CE

On Harsha's death his empire at once fell apart, but the Chalukya kingdom continued.

- Again northern India was divided amongst **many small kingdoms** - but the situation was not quite the same as before (note 1).
- The kingdom of the **Chalukyas** endured for more than a century after Pulakeshin's death (note 2).

Additional notes

1: Northern India

Harsha's empire fragmented as vassal rulers broke away to become independent kings. Once again northern India was divided amongst numerous kingdoms.

Harsha's former capital city of **Kannauj**, however, retained a certain aura of imperial glory about it. In the coming centuries, different kings would fight to possess it, and thus to lay claim to Harsha's legacy.

2. Central and southern India

Although the Chalukya kings continued to dominate central India, their power gradually weakened. Shortly after Pulakeshin's death a Chalukyan prince set up an independent kingdom and founded the **Eastern Chalukya** kingdom.

On the Chalukya's southern border was their greatest foe, the **Pallava kingdom**. This dominated south India. It maintained its pre-eminence there through a system of alliances with its neighbors, the **Cera**, **Pandyas** and **Cholas**.

Map 4: 757 CE

By this date Islam has established a firm foothold in the subcontinent.

- The **Islamic Caliphate** has occupied a large chunk of modern-day Pakistan (note 1).
- Three ambitious kingdoms struggled with one another to dominate **northern India** (note 2).
- In the Deccan, the **Rashtrakutas** dynasty replaced the Chalukyas. They then tried to expand their territory into both northern and southern India (note 3).

Additional notes

1. Islam in India

The first major invasion of the Indian Subcontinent by Islamic forces came in 711 CE, when an Arab army of the Islamic Caliphate occupied a large chunk of what is now **Pakistan**.

Islam thus established a firm foothold in South Asia, but strong Indian kingdoms fended off any the further Muslim advances - for now.

2. Northern India

Northern India is dominated by three powerful kingdoms. In the west is the kingdom of the **Gurjara-Pratihara** dynasty. These kings have risen to prominence as the defenders of India against Muslim advances.

In the east, in Bengal, the **Pala** dynasty has recently founded a powerful kingdom. The Palas are notable as the last major **Buddhist** dynasty in India, under whom the great university of **Nalanda** reaches its peak of influence. They maintain strong religious and diplomatic ties with Buddhist states in **South East Asia**.

The third kingdom in this struggle is the Deccan kingdom of the **Rashtrakutas** (see next note).

The rivalry between these three kingdoms (known to Indian history as the “**Tripartite Struggle**”) dominates the history of this region. The struggle centers on capturing the city of **Kannauj**, Harsha’s old imperial capital. Holding this city symbolises their overlordship of northern India.

First one, then another, of these kingdoms succeeds in capturing Kannauj, in some cases more than once. They are never able to hold it for long, however.

3. Central and southern India

The **Rashtrakuta** dynasty has recently taken over from the Chalukya dynasty in the Deccan (in 753).

Although the Rashtrakuta kings are based in central India, they seek to project their power into both northern and southern India.

In seeking to dominate the north, they became involved in the long-lasting Tripartite Struggle (see the note above). In southern India, their main foes, as with their Chalukya predecessors, are the **Pallavas**.

The Pallavas have continued to be a leading power in this part of the subcontinent. However, the **Pandys**, in the far south, have by now renounced their alliance with the Pallavas and are expanding their own territory.

Map 5: 850 CE

The history of northern India from the 8th to 10th centuries continues to be dominated by the struggles between three powerful kingdoms.

- The rivalry between the three kingdoms of the Gurjara-Pratiharas, the Palas and the Rashtrakutas continues to dominate the history of **northern India** (note 1).
- The Rashtrakutas of the **Deccan** briefly succeed in dominating the entire subcontinent (note 2).
- Throughout the subcontinent, **Buddhism** is losing ground to **Hinduism** (note 3).

Additional notes

1. Northern India

The rivalry between the three kingdoms of the **Gurjara-Pratiharas**, the **Palas** and the **Rashtrakutas** continues to dominate the history of northern India. Their main objective is to hold the imperial city of **Kanauj**.

The Muslim states

In the north west of the subcontinent, the Muslim rulers of **Sind** and **Multan** have become effectively independent from their theoretical masters, the Caliphs in Baghdad (as part of a process in which the huge **Islamic Caliphate** is breaking up).

Despite their independence from the Caliph, Islam has been spreading amongst the population of these two areas. The existence of the modern state of Pakistan, whose population is majority Muslim, bears witness to the success of this process.

But the traffic in ideas is not one way. Indian **mathematical** and **scientific** knowledge has passed westward and been taken up by scholars based in Baghdad. Important elements of this are the **decimal system** and the concept of **zero**. From Baghdad these will spread around the Muslim world and thence to Europe.

2. Central and southern India

The **Rashtrakutas** are much more expansionist than the Chalukyas had been, especially under great warrior-kings such as Govinda III, Indra III and Krishna III. They have been able to dominate much of the subcontinent on more than one occasion, although only briefly.

In the south, the **Pandyas** have replaced the Pallavas as the strongest kingdom.

3. Buddhism and Hinduism

Hindu cults have responded to the challenge of **Buddhism** and **Jainism** by becoming more personal and emotional in their practices. As a result, the Buddhist and Jain religions are in retreat.

This seems to have been a very gradual process. Rulers in central India are continuing to patronize cave-temples of all three religions.

Map 6: 1030 CE

Northern India has been suffering at the hands of Muslim raiders, while in the south the Chola kingdom has become the dominant power.

- A fearsome Turkish leader, **Mahmud of Ghazni**, has been launching a succession of devastating raids across northern India (note 1).

- In the Deccan, the **Rashtrakutas** have fallen, and the **Chalukyas** have regained power (note 2).
- The **Chola** kingdom now dominates southern India, and is now a major maritime power (note 3).

Additional notes

1. Northern India

Mahmud of Ghazni, a Turkish warrior-leader, established a militaristic kingdom in present-day **Afghanistan**, in the late 10th century. Having done so, he has launched a succession of devastating raids into northern India.

Wherever Mahmud's forces have gone they have defeated local Indian rulers, destroyed Hindu temples, massacred as many Hindus as he can, and carried off vast hoards of treasure. The magnificent city of **Kannauj** has been sacked at this time, and will never again reach its former glory.

The Rajputs

Mahmud of Ghazni's attacks have destroyed the power of the **Gurjara-Pratiharas**. In their place, rival kingdoms have struggled for power in western India, notably the **Paramaras** and **Chauhanas**.

The ruling classes of these states belong to a warrior aristocracy known as the **Rajputs**. From now on, many Rajput states will rise and fall, and will remain a force to be reckoned with right up to the 19th century.

2. Central India

The Rashtrakutas fell from power in 973, when a member of the old royal power, the **Chalukyas**, seized control. He established another formidable kingdom in the Western Deccan.

3. The Chola empire

The Chola kingdom began to expand strongly in the 10th century, helped by the growing weakness of both the **Pandyas** and the **Pallavas**. In 949 however they received a major check when they were soundly defeated by the Rashtrakutas.

The Cholas recovered their power in the late 10th century, and in the early 11th century have launched sea-borne expeditions to **Sri Lanka**, and even, apparently,

to **South East Asia**. Uniquely in Indian history, the Chola kingdom has become a major maritime power in the Indian Ocean.

Indian overseas merchants

Communities of Indian **merchants** have long been settled on the coasts of South East Asia, and have played an extremely important part in founding kingdoms and developing civilization in that region. Under Chola protection, Indian commercial activity probably reaches its height. This will not last, however. Indian merchant activity will sinking into relative decline in the face of competition from **Arab** seamen and traders.

Map 7: 1186 CE

Muslim rulers are beginning to get more ambitious, and are looking not just to raid but to conquer territories in northern India.

- Another Muslim warrior-leader based in **Afghanistan** begins conquering a large territory in the subcontinent (note 1).
- In the **Deccan** and **the South**, now covered by a number of smaller kingdoms, some of India's most magnificent **Hindu temples** are being erected in this period (note 2).
- By this time, **Buddhism** is in steep decline in India (note 3).

Additional notes

1. Muhammed of Ghur

Although a major scourge in northern India, **Mahmud of Ghazni** did not occupy territory there. Nevertheless his campaigns had shown Muslim rulers in **Afghanistan** how disunited northern India had become, and how easily they could be picked off, one by one.

Unsurprisingly, other Muslim leaders decided to take advantage of this situation. **Muhammed of Ghur** (whose family had seized power from Mahmud's family), is now looking to occupy territory in the subcontinent.

2. Central and southern India

In the Deccan, the **Chalukya** have declined in power, as have the **Chola** of southern India. The latter have lost their maritime pre-eminence in the Indian Ocean and have been driven out of Sri Lanka and South East Asia.

The decline of these two states has led to the rise of a number of smaller kingdoms in southern India, including the **Yadava**, the **Kakatiya** and the **Hoysala**.

These are home to a flowering of Hindu art, architecture and literature, with some of India's most magnificent temples being built in this period.

3. The decline of Buddhism and Jainism

In northern India the Muslim invasions seem to have rallied the majority of the population behind **Hinduism**. As a result, **Buddhism** has experienced further decline in northern India. **Jainism**, never a widely practiced faith, has also lost followers.

Southern India has never been as welcoming to Buddhism and Jainism as the north, and Hinduism seems to be completely triumphant here.

Buddhism is heading towards virtual extinction in the land of its birth.

One result of the long decline of Buddhism, with its forthright teaching that all are equal, is the triumph of the Hindu doctrine of **caste**. It seems that caste divisions have begun to grow harder during these centuries, and would remain almost unbridgeable until modern times.

Map 8: 1226 CE

The first great Muslim state in India has emerged.

- **Muhammed of Ghur's** armies conquered a large part of northern India, but on his death these territories broke away to form the independent **Sultanate of Delhi** (note 1).
- The expansion of Muslim rule in the subcontinent would lead to the emergence of a new language in India, **Urdu** (note 2).

Additional notes

1. The Sultanate of Delhi

Muhammed of Ghur's armies had conquered a large part of northern India by the time of his death in 1206. These armies were commanded by **slave generals**, and when Muhammed died, one of these asserted his independence.

He and his successors have met with stiff resistance from native Indian princes (especially the **Rajputs**). They have also had to deal with several internal rebellions. Nevertheless they have succeeded in expanding their territory in all directions. They are creating the first major Muslim state in the Indian subcontinent.

These **sultans** (independent Muslim rulers) have chosen the city of **Delhi** as their capital, and this important state is known in Indian history as the **Sultanate of Delhi**.

2. Urdu

The word Urdu means the language of the Camp, or the soldier's language.

Muslim armies are made up predominantly of soldiers from **Afghanistan** and central Asia. Over the previous centuries, the peoples of these regions had long ago adopted the **Persian** language as their own, and this is the language of the court in Delhi.

The ordinary soldiers in the Muslim armies, however, have come to speak a language in which Persian, plus some elements of Arabic and Turkish, has mingled with the native Indian **Hindi**. This new language is called **Urdu**.

The loyalty of these foreign adventurers to the Sultanate is not deep. They fight bravely for their new masters - but more bravely for themselves when their interests differ from those of their rulers. Revolts against the sultans are frequent.

Map 9: 1316 CE

The Sultanate has expanded to cover the whole of northern India.

- The **Delhi Sultanate** has continued to experience considerable political instability, but has still been able to conquer the whole of northern India (note 1).

Additional note

1. The Delhi Sultanate

The Delhi Sultanate has suffered from regular bouts of political instability, with usurpations bringing new dynasties to the throne every few decades. At the same time, renewed invasions from central Asia, this time in the shape of the **Mongols**, have added to the Sultanate's challenges.

Despite all these difficulties, the sultans have been able to gradually push out their borders. Two factors have helped. First, the Hindu states have never combined to resist the newcomers. Second, the violent struggles for power within the sultanate have produced some extraordinarily vigorous rulers, such as **Ilutmish** (reigned 1211-10), **Balban** (1266-86) and **Alauddin Khalji** (1296-1316).

By this date, at the end of Alauddin's reign, the Delhi Sultanate covers all of northern India.

Map 10: 1335 CE

The Sultanate has now grown to cover nearly the whole of the Indian subcontinent.

- Under the sultan **Muhammad Tughluq** (1325-51), the **Delhi sultanate** reaches the height of its power. It covers all but the southernmost parts of the Indian Subcontinent (note 1).
- It was at this time that the famous traveller, **Ibn Battuta**, visited India (note 2).

Additional notes

1. Muhammad Tughluq

Muhammed Tughluq was the son of a military commander of central Asian origin - quite possibly a slave - who had seized power from the reigning sultan. Such a coup was a far from uncommon event in the history of the Delhi Sultanate, as we have noted. Muhammad himself is said to have faced more than **twenty rebellions**: instability was one of the main hallmarks of the sultanate's politics.

Unsurprisingly in these circumstances, Muhammad was a **ruthless** and paranoid ruler; but he was also, again like many of the other sultans, **cultured** and learned. He could speak several languages, and had a keen interest in science and medicine.

Muhammad was, like other sultans, **tolerant** in matters of religion. He had married a **Rajput** princess, and he allowed **Hindu** temples to be built and repaired. He was assisted in government by Hindu advisors. However, throughout the time of the Delhi Sultanate a tax on non-Muslims (which was usual in Muslim-ruled states) remained in place.

2. Ibn Battuta

Ibn Battuta was a native of North Africa who had arrived from the Middle East. He lived at the court of Muhammad Tughluq for several years, and later wrote about his experiences - which is why we know more about this ruler than any other of the Delhi sultans.

Ibn Battuta admired Muhammad, but feared him. On more than one occasion he aroused Muhammad's suspicions and was in danger of his life.

Map 11: 1348 CE

The period of the Sultanate's greatest extent has only lasted for a few brief years.

- Great **rebellions** have snatched the southern half of the empire from its control. The Sultanate is again confined to the northern half of the subcontinent (note 1).

Additional note

1. Two new states in the south

As noted above, the **Delhi Sultanate** was constantly wracked by rebellions, and such events even occurred in the reign of such a forceful ruler as **Muhammad Tughluq**. Two great rebellions in the south tore his southern provinces from his grasp.

His plans to put down these rebellions have been undermined by a famine and plague (probably the **Black Death**) which has swept through his army.

The rebellions create two powerful new states: the Muslim sultanate of **Bahmani** in the Deccan, and, in the far south, the powerful Hindu kingdom of **Vijayanagara**.

Map 12: 1450 CE

The Delhi sultanate has continued to decline until it has lost most of its territory.

- The sultanate's territories have dwindled to include only the city of **Delhi** itself and its surrounding area (note 1).
- The decline of the **Delhi Sultanate** has left India divided into many states, most of them under Muslim rulers (note 2).
- The Delhi Sultanate has also left a legacy of cultural **fusion** as Islamic and Indian elements mingle (note 3).

Additional notes

1. The further decline of the Delhi Sultanate

In 1398 another central Asian invader, **Timur the Lame**, attacked deep into northern India, as far as Delhi. He sacked the city before returning to his homeland, striking an enormous blow to the Sultanate's prestige.

Since this catastrophe, the sultanate's territories have quickly dwindled until, by the mid-15th century, they include only the city of Delhi itself and some surrounding areas.

2. A legacy of Muslim rule

The receding frontiers of the Sultanate have left in their train a hotchpotch of states. In the northern half of the subcontinent, these include a group of **Rajput** kingdoms, which had never really been properly incorporated into the Sultanate's territory.

All the other states are ruled by Muslim **sultans**. The Delhi Sultanate may have declined, but it has left a legacy of **Islamic rule** throughout most of India.

3. A legacy of cultural fusion

Under the Delhi sultanate, Islamic elements in **art and architecture** have begun to mingle with native Indian styles. This is producing a rich cultural fusion which would, in due course, produce some of the most striking monuments in the world.

The most sublime example must surely be the **Taj Mahal**, which would be designed and constructed in the Mughal era, about two hundred years after this date. Already some of the **motifs** which would go into it are visible in the buildings and decorations of the Sultanate.

Questions

The answers are given (*in Italics*).

1. Which empire was in decline in the 6th century CE? (*The Gupta empire*)
2. What was the name of the conqueror of northern India in the early 7th century CE? (*Harsha Vardhana - just Harsha will do nicely*)
3. What is the large plain which covers much of central and southern India called? (*The Deccan*)
4. Which powerful kingdom arose there in the 7th century CE? (*The Chalukya kingdom*)
5. Which great religion was losing ground by the mid-9th century? (*Buddhism*) ...
6. ... and which was gaining ground at its expense? (*Hinduism*)
7. What was the southern Indian kingdom which rose to become a maritime power in the 11th century? (*The Chola*)
8. What was the designation given to a group of Hindu warrior-rulers who ruled some states in northwest India from at least the 11th century onwards? (*The Rajputs*)
9. What was the Muslim sultanate whose rise and fall dominated the history of India from the 13th through 15th centuries? (*The Delhi sultanate*)
10. What was the name of the Muslim traveller who wrote a description of life at this sultan's court in the early-mid 14th century? (*Ibn Battuta*)

Further reading

Here is a selected list of the key Timemaps articles which students should find helpful.

[Medieval India](#)

[The Deccan empires](#)

[Rajput India](#)

[The Delhi Sultanate](#)

and for background, Ancient India