

The Reach of Imperialism 1800-1914

THE STORY MATTERS...

After 1870 the industrialized nations of Europe engaged in an unprecedented competition to acquire overseas colonies. A struggle for economic and military power largely motivated this intense rivalry, which historians refer to as the “new imperialism.” The “Jewel in the Crown” of the vast British Empire was India. The British attempted to dominate every aspect of Indian life, including the culture. One Indian who resisted this cultural imperialism was the Bengali writer Rabindranath Tagore

Lesson 25-3

British Rule in India

READING HELPDESK

Academic Vocabulary

civil estate

Content Vocabulary

sepoys viceroys

ESSENTIAL QUESTION

- What are the causes and effects of imperialism?
- How do some groups resist control by others?

IT MATTERS BECAUSE

The British brought order and stability to India, but India paid a high price for British rule. The mistrust and cultural differences between the British and Indians sparked an independence movement and renewed interest among Indians in their culture and history

The Great Rebellion

GUIDING QUESTION *What was the source of conflict between the British and the Indian people?*

Over the course of the eighteenth century, British power in India had increased while the power of the Mogul rulers had declined. The British government gave a trading company, the British East India Company, power to become actively involved in India’s political and military affairs. To rule India, the British East India Company had its own soldiers and forts. It also hired Indian soldiers, known as **sepoys**, to protect the company’s interests in the region.

Events Leading to Rebellion

In 1857 a growing Indian distrust of the British led to a revolt. The British call the revolt the *Sepoy Mutiny*. Indians call it the First War of Independence. Neutral observers label it the Great Rebellion. The major immediate cause of the revolt was a rumor that the troops’ new rifle cartridges were greased with cow and pig fat. The cow was sacred to Hindus. The pig was taboo to Muslims. To load a rifle at that time, soldiers had to bite off the end of the cartridge. To the *sepoys*, touching these greased cartridges to their lips would mean that they were polluted. A group of *sepoys* at an army post in Meerut, near Delhi, refused to load their rifles with the cartridges. The British

charged them with mutiny, publicly humiliated them, and put them in prison. This treatment of their comrades enraged the *sepoy* troops in Meerut. They went on a rampage, killing 50 European men, women, and children. Soon other Indians joined the revolt, including princes whose land the British had taken.

Within a year, however, Indian troops loyal to the British and fresh British troops had crushed the rebellion. Although Indian troops fought bravely and outnumbered the British by about 230,000 to 45,000, they were not well organized. Rivalries between Hindus and Muslims kept the Indians from working together.

Atrocities were terrible on both sides. At Kanpur (Cawnpore), Indians massacred 200 defenseless women and children in a building known as the House of the Ladies. Recapturing Kanpur, the British took their revenge before executing the Indians.

Effects of the Rebellion

As a result of the uprising, the British Parliament transferred the powers of the East India Company directly to the British government. In 1876 Britain’s Queen Victoria took the title Empress of India. The people of India were now her colonial subjects, and India then became her “Jewel in the Crown.”

Although the rebellion failed, it helped fuel Indian nationalism. The rebellion marked the first significant attempt by the people of South Asia to throw off British Raj (rule). Later, a new generation of Indian leaders would take up the cause.

READING PROGRESS CHECK

Determining Cause and Effect What were the effects of the Great Rebellion in India?

British Colonial Rule

GUIDING QUESTION *What were the consequences of British rule in India?*

After the Great Rebellion, the British government began to rule India directly. They appointed a British official known as a **viceroy** (a governor who ruled as a representative of a monarch). A British civil service staff

assisted the viceroy. This staff of about 3,500 officials ruled almost 300 million people, the largest colonial population in the world. British rule involved both benefits and costs for Indians.

British rule in India had several benefits for colonial subjects. It brought order and stability to a society badly divided into many states with different, and sometimes opposing, political systems. It also led to a fairly honest, efficient government.

Through the efforts of the British administrator and historian Lord Thomas Macaulay, a new school system was set up. The new system used the English language, as Macaulay explained:

PRIMARY SOURCE

“What then shall [the language of education] be? [Some] maintain that it should be the English. The other half strongly recommend the Arabic and Sanskrit. The whole question seems to me to be, which language is the best worth knowing? ... It is, I believe, no exaggeration to say that all the historical information which has been collected from all the books written in the Sanskrit language is less valuable [than] what may be found in [short textbooks] used at preparatory schools in England.”

– Lord Macaulay, from speech to Parliament,
February 2, 1835

The goal of the new school system was to train Indian children to serve in the government and army. The new system served only elite, upper-class Indians, however. Ninety percent of the population remained uneducated and illiterate.

The British hired Indians and built roads, canals, universities, and medical centers. A postal service was introduced shortly after it appeared in Great Britain. India's first rail network, beginning in Bombay, opened in 1853. By 1900, 25,000 miles (40,225 km) of railroads crisscrossed India. Health and sanitation conditions were also improved.

But the Indian people paid a high price for the peace and stability brought by British rule. Perhaps the greatest cost was economic. British entrepreneurs and a small number of Indians reaped financial benefits from British rule, but it brought hardship to millions of others in both the cities and the countryside. British manufactured goods destroyed local industries. British textiles put thousands of women out of work and severely damaged the Indian textile industry.

In rural areas, the British sent the *zamindars* to collect taxes. The British believed that using these local officials would make it easier to collect taxes from the peasants. However, the *zamindars* in India took advantage of their new authority. They increased taxes and forced the less fortunate peasants to become tenants or lose their land entirely. Peasant unrest grew.

The British also encouraged many Indian farmers to switch from growing food to growing cotton. As a consequence, food supplies could not keep up with the

growing population. Between 1800 and 1900, 30 million Indians died of starvation.

Analyzing PRIMARY SOURCES

Rabindranath Tagore on India

“The conditions which have prevailed in India from a remote antiquity have guided its history along a particular channel, which does not and cannot coincide with the lines of evolution taken by other countries under different sets of influences. It would be a sad misreading of the lessons of the past to tread too closely in the footsteps of any other nation, however successful in its own career.

I feel strongly that our country has been entrusted with a message which is not a mere echo of the living voices that resound from western shores ...”

– Rabindranath Tagore
from a letter, January 4, 1909

DRAWING CONCLUSIONS

What attitude would Tagore have had toward the opinion expressed by Macaulay about the use of English to educate Indians?

Finally, British rule was degrading, even for the newly educated upper classes who benefited the most from it. The best jobs and the best housing were reserved for Britons. Although many British colonial officials sincerely tried to improve the lot of the people in India, British arrogance and racial attitudes cut deeply into the pride of many Indians and led to the rise of an Indian nationalist movement.

READING PROGRESS CHECK

Analyzing Information What was the price Indians had to pay for the increased stability of British rule?

CONNECTIONS TO *Today*

One legacy of imperialism is evident in the Commonwealth Games. Participation in the games is limited to amateur athletes who come from one of the countries of the British Commonwealth, the free association of states that includes many former parts of the British Empire. A more recent addition to the games is cricket, which the British brought to their colonies. Cricket is especially popular in India.

Indian Nationalists

GUIDING QUESTION How did British rule influence Indian culture?

The first Indian nationalists were upper-class and English-educated. Many of them were from urban areas, such as Bombay (Mumbai), Madras (Chennai), and Calcutta (Kolkata). Some were trained in British law and were members of the civil service.

At first, many Indian nationalists preferred reform to revolution. However, the slow pace of reform convinced many that relying on British goodwill was futile. In 1885 a small group of Indians met in Bombay to form the Indian

National Congress (INC).

The INC did not demand immediate independence. Instead, the group called for a share in the governing process. The INC had difficulties because of religious differences. The INC sought independence for all Indians, regardless of class or religious background. However, many of its leaders were Hindu and reflected Hindu concerns. Later, Muslims called for the creation of a separate Muslim League. Such a league would represent the interests of the millions of Muslims in Indian society.

In 1914 the return of a young Hindu from South Africa brought new life to India's struggle for independence. Mohandas Gandhi was born in 1869 in Gujarat, in western India. He studied in London and became a lawyer. In 1893 Gandhi went to South Africa to work in a law firm serving Indian workers there. He soon learned of the racial exploitation of Indians living in South Africa.

On his return to India, Gandhi became active in the independence movement. Using his experience in South Africa, he began a movement based on nonviolent resistance. Its aim was to force the British to improve the lot of the poor and to grant independence to India. Ultimately, Gandhi's movement led to Indian independence.

READING PROGRESS CHECK

Identifying Central Issues What difficulties did the Indian National Congress face?

Colonial Indian Culture

GUIDING QUESTION How did British rule influence Indian culture?

From the beginning of their rule, the British often showed disrespect for India's cultural heritage. The Taj Mahal, for example, was built as a tomb for the beloved wife of an Indian ruler. The British used it as a favorite site for weddings and parties. Many partygoers even brought hammers to chip off pieces as souvenirs.

The love-hate tension in India that arose from British domination led to a cultural awakening as well. The cultural revival began in the early nineteenth century with the creation of a British college in Calcutta. A local publishing house was opened. It issued textbooks on a variety of subjects, including the sciences, Sanskrit, and Western literature. The publisher also printed grammars and dictionaries in various Indian languages.

This revival soon spread to other regions of India. It led to a search for a new national identity and a modern literary expression. Indian novelists and poets began writing historical romances and epics. Some wrote in English, but most were uncomfortable with a borrowed colonial language. They preferred to use their own regional tongues.

Printed in the various regional Indian languages, newspapers were a common medium used to arouse mass support for nationalist causes. These newspapers reached the lower-middle-class populations – tens of thousands of Indians who had never learned a word of English. In his newspaper *Kesari* ("The Lion"), journalist Balwantrao Gangadhar Tilak used innuendo (suggestion) to convey the negative feelings about the British without ever writing anything disloyal.

The most famous Indian author was Rabindranath Tagore, winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1913. A great writer and poet, Tagore had many talents. He was also a social reformer, spiritual leader, educator, philosopher, singer, painter, and international spokesperson for the moral concerns of his age. Tagore liked to invite the great thinkers of the time to his expansive country home, or estate. There he set up a school that became an international university.

Tagore's life mission was to promote pride in a national Indian consciousness in the face of British domination. He wrote a widely read novel in which he portrayed the love-hate relationship of India toward its colonial mentor. The novel reflected an Indian people who admired and imitated the British but who agonized over how to establish their own national identity.

Rabindranath Tagore, however, was more than an Indian nationalist. His life's work was one long prayer for human dignity, world peace, and the mutual understanding and union of East and West. As Tagore once said,

PRIMARY SOURCE

"It is my conviction that my countrymen will truly gain their India by fighting against the education that teaches them that a country is greater than the ideals of humanity."

– Rabindranath Tagore, from *Nationalism*

READING PROGRESS CHECK

Drawing Conclusions How did newspapers and literature help shape the nationalist movement?

REVIEWING VOCABULARY

sepoy	an Indian soldier hired by the British East India Company to protect the company's interests in the region
viceroy	a governor who ruled as a representative of a monarch