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Origins of Indian nationalism and impact of the First World War

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Introduction

The development of the Indian nationalist movement and demands for independence developed as a reaction against British policies and actions during the period when India was a British colony. Before the First World War, two rival nationalist organisations were formed: the Indian National Congress, which pressed for greater Indian representation in government, and the All-India Muslim League, which represented the interests of the Muslim minority. This chapter will examine the origins of Indian nationalism before 1914, as well as the impact of the First World War on India. During the war, the nationalist movement was strengthened by the activities of the Home Rule Leagues, which called for self-government and dominion status for India.

TIMELINE

- 1857** Indian Uprising against the rule of the East India Company (EIC)
- 1858** Government of India Act: British government takes control
- 1885** First meeting of the Indian National Congress
- 1892** Limited representation of Indians on provincial legislatures
- 1905** Partition of Bengal; anti-partition protests; start of *Swadeshi* movement
- 1906** Simla Deputation
Formation of All-India Muslim League in Dhaka
- 1909** India Councils Act implements Morley-Minto reforms
- 1911** Capital of British India moved from Calcutta to Delhi
Reunification of Bengal
- 1914–18** First World War
- 1914–15** *Ghadar* movement
- 1914 June:** Tilak released from prison
- 1915 Jan:** Gandhi returns from South Africa
Mar: Defence of India Act
- 1916 April:** Tilak forms Home Rule League in Poona
Sept: Besant forms Home Rule League in Madras
Dec: Lucknow Pact between Congress and Muslim League

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Nationalism and Independence in India (1919–1964)**1917 June:** Arrest of Besant and other Home Rule leaders**1918–19** Spanish Flu epidemic**1918 Aug:** Announcement of Montagu-Chelmsford reforms**KEY QUESTIONS**

- What were the origins of the nationalist movement in India?
- How did the First World War affect India?
- To what extent did the demands for Home Rule boost the nationalist movement?

Overview

- Until 1947 India was a British colony. Colonial rule was efficient but authoritarian, and Indians themselves had no meaningful representation in it. Britain applied a policy of ‘divide and rule’ which emphasised religious and other differences among the people of India.
- Britain derived great economic benefits from India, including raw materials and markets. Indian soldiers fought in Britain’s colonial wars, and indentured workers from India provided labour in other British colonies.
- In 1885, educated Indians formed the first nationalist organisation – the Indian National Congress. It called for greater representation for Indians in government, rather than independence from British rule.
- Muslim leaders formed a separate organisation, the All-India Muslim League, in 1906, to protect and advance the interests of Muslims, who were a minority in a predominantly Hindu country.
- During the First World War, India provided troops and supplies for the Allied war effort on a huge scale. In return for their considerable contribution to Britain’s victory over Germany, Indians hoped for self-rule after the war.
- The war caused widespread hardship for many Indians as a result of food and fuel shortages, higher prices and increased taxation.

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These problems were aggravated in 1918 by a severe famine and the Spanish Flu epidemic which killed over 12 million Indians.

- During the war Home Rule Leagues were established, calling for self-government and dominion status for India. The movement gave a boost to Indian nationalism, especially after the Indian National Congress adopted Home Rule as a political goal.
- The popularity of the Home Rule movement, as well as India's contribution to the war effort, prompted the British government to introduce constitutional reforms, which were outlined in the Montagu-Chelmsford proposals of 1918.

2.1 What were the origins of the nationalist movement in India?

The nationalist movement in India began in the period of British colonial rule. The movement developed as a reaction against the policies and actions of the British government in India as well as the attitudes of the British towards the Indian people.

British rule in India

British interest in India began when the English East India Company (EIC) set up trading posts along the coast from the beginning of the 17th century. EIC rule gradually expanded into the interior, and by the middle of the 19th century the company controlled extensive parts of India and had a large private army. Although there was still a Mughal emperor, based at the 'Red Fort' in Delhi, he had no real power. However, an uprising against EIC control in 1857 and 1858 resulted in the intervention of the British government, which sent troops to crush the rebellion and take over control from the EIC. Both sides were responsible for atrocities during the uprising and its suppression, and this left a legacy of bitterness and distrust.

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Nationalism and Independence in India (1919–1964)**Theory of Knowledge****History, terminology and bias**

Indian nationalists regard the 1857 uprising as the First War of Independence. The British, however, referred to it as the 'Indian Mutiny', because it started among *sepoys*, Indian soldiers serving in the Bengal army of the EIC. The uprising had broad-based support from a wide range of Indians, however, including peasants, workers, landlords and princes.

What would be a more neutral term to describe this event? Use this example, and others you can think of, to explain how terminology can reflect bias in History.

ACTIVITY

Use the internet to find out information about the 1857 uprising. Was it planned or did it arise spontaneously? What impact did it have on British policies and actions in India? How did it affect Indian attitudes towards the British?

The Mughal emperor had supported the uprising, and after its failure he was removed from power and sent into exile. In 1858 the British parliament passed the Government of India Act, making India part of the British Empire, and in 1876 Queen Victoria was declared 'Empress of India'. Large parts of the country were placed under direct British administration, but some areas remained under the control of hereditary Indian rulers, with whom the British signed treaties that recognised their autonomy over local affairs. However, a British official (called the 'Resident' in the larger states and a 'Political Officer' in the smaller ones) ensured that British interests were always upheld. There were over 550 of these 'princely states', as they were called. Some of these were extensive, such as Hyderabad and Kashmir, but others were very small.

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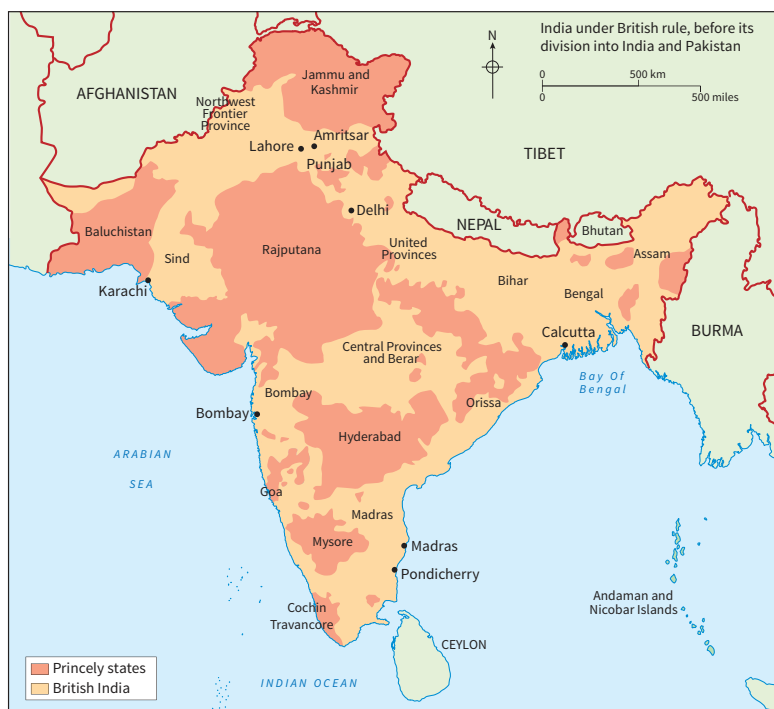


Figure 2.1: A map showing areas of India under British control until 1947 and the princely states.

The structure of British rule

After the harsh suppression of the 1857–58 uprising, British power in India seemed to be secure. The British referred to their empire in India as the ‘Raj’, a Hindi word for rule. The colonial administration was initially situated in Calcutta, which had been the centre of EIC control, although it was later moved to Delhi. The highest official was the viceroy who was appointed by the British government in London and ruled India on behalf of the British monarch. There was a great deal of status, material comfort and wealth attached to the position, and the salary of the viceroy was double that of the British prime minister. However, the viceroy had limited power to influence policy, which was decided by the British government in London and implemented by the Secretary of State for India, who was advised by a Council of India (none of whose members were Indian).

The administration was run by 5000 officials who formed the Indian Civil Service (ICS). They provided efficient, but authoritarian,

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government. Positions in the ICS were well-paid and highly prized among ambitious young Englishmen who had to sit competitive exams before they were accepted. Indians themselves had no meaningful representation in this government, although they later formed the bulk of the junior staff in the Indian Civil Service. British control over 300 million Indians was enforced by a large army, staffed by British officers and Indian troops. The administration and the army were financed out of taxes paid by Indians.

Economic and political benefits to Britain

The British viewed India as the most valuable possession in the British Empire and referred to it as the ‘Jewel in the Crown’. They derived great economic benefits from it. Money, collected from peasants in the form of taxes, was transferred to London to fund the British government’s purchase of EIC shares, finance capital investments (especially railways), and provide funds for the administration of India.

Critics felt that the money could have been better used for internal investments in India itself. Trade between Britain and India was facilitated by the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869, which drastically reduced the distance, time and costs of transporting goods.

Britain benefited from the balance of trade with India, which supplied raw materials – mainly cotton, jute, indigo, rice and tea – to British factories. In return, India bought manufactured goods such as textiles, iron and steel goods and machinery and, by 1914, was the biggest export market for British goods.

As a result, India under colonial rule was no longer an exporter of cloth to European markets. Instead it produced raw cotton that was manufactured into cloth in British factories and re-exported to Asia. Another disadvantage for India was that land formerly used to grow grains for staple foods was now used for commercial cash-crop production, making peasants dependent on foods grown elsewhere.

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Figure 2.2: The routes between Britain and India via the Suez Canal and via the Cape of Good Hope.

India also served Britain's political and economic interests in other parts of the empire. Indian soldiers, paid for by Indian tax payers, were used to protect trade routes and serve British interests in China, East Africa and the Middle East. In the 20th century, large numbers of Indian soldiers provided military support for Britain in both world wars. India also served as a source of indentured labourers for British colonies in the West Indies, Africa and other parts of Asia.

By 1920, however, the system of indenture was stopped, partly as a result of criticism from Indian nationalists, who saw it as one of 'imperial exploitation that brought shame to India', according to Barbara and Thomas Metcalf. These historians also note that the plight of diaspora Indians was a 'critical stimulus to Indian nationalism'.

The nature of British rule

The British who went to live in India were predominantly men employed by the ICS or the army, sometimes accompanied by their

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wives and young children, who would then be sent back to England for their schooling. Attended by large numbers of Indian servants, most of these British residents experienced a far more luxurious lifestyle than they could afford in England. They lived mainly in the big cities, especially Calcutta, but moved to the cool foothills of the Himalayas in the hot summer months. Even the viceroy and his staff relocated the government to Simla for the summer. When the men retired they would inevitably return to England with their pensions funded by Indian taxes. The British in India were a ruling élite; an alien and in many cases arrogant minority, who regarded the Indians as subordinate and untrustworthy, and India as an exotic but uncomfortable place to live, as historian David Ludden explains:

SOURCE 2.1

South Asia was too hot, dirty, crowded, distant and alien to attract many British citizens. At the peak of their numerical strength, in 1911, British residents in British India numbered 185 434, under one percent of Britain's population and about six one-hundredths of one percent (0.06%) of British India's population. These small numbers lived mostly in securely segregated British enclaves, doing their jobs and maintaining English-style households and communities, trying to live as comfortably as possible until they could go home, hopefully better off than when they arrived.

Ludden, David. 2014. India and South Asia: A Short History. London. Oneworld Publications. p. 154.

QUESTION

What message is conveyed by Source 2.1 about the attitudes of the British towards India?

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The British believed that government should be firm and vigilant against the rise of any resistance to their rule. Above all, they wanted to prevent the formation of a united opposition movement. To this end, they stressed differences between people – significantly, differences of religion, and also of caste. They regarded caste as a form of fixed identity, instead of something that had developed and changed over time.

According to the historian Thomas Metcalf, the British saw caste as a ‘concrete, measurable “thing” that could be fitted into a hierarchy able to be ascertained and quantified in reports and surveys’. The result of this colonial policy was to create and intensify existing differences in Indian society.

The British brought certain benefits to India. These included an efficient administration and judicial system, a good railway network and Western education for some. However, British rule was always based on an assumption of superiority.

SOURCE 2.2

We must rule our Asiatic subjects with strict and generous justice, wisely and beneficently, as their natural superiors, by virtue of our purer religion, our sterner energies, our subtler intellect, our more creative faculties, our more commanding and indomitable will.

*A British official, quoted in James, Lawrence. 1997. **Raj: The Making and Unmaking of British India.** London. Little, Brown and Company. p. 297.*

Indians resented the harsh realities of colonial control and the superior attitudes of the colonising power towards them. This view was later explained by Jawaharlal Nehru, who became a leading figure in the nationalist movement against British rule:

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SOURCE 2.3

We in India have known racialism in all its forms since the beginning of British rule. The whole ideology of this rule was that of the master race, and the structure of government was based upon it; indeed the idea of the master race is inherent in (central to) imperialism. There was no subterfuge (nothing hidden) about it; it was proclaimed in unambiguous (direct) language by those in authority. More powerful than words was the practice that accompanied them and, generation after generation and year after year, India as a nation and Indians as individuals were subjected to insult, humiliation, and contemptuous treatment. The English were an imperial race, we were told, with the God-given right to govern us and keep us in subjection. As an Indian I am ashamed to write all this, for the memory of it hurts, and what hurts still more is that we submitted for so long to this degradation. I would have preferred any kind of resistance to this, whatever the consequences, rather than that our people should endure this treatment.

Nehru, J. 1946. The Discovery of India. London. Meridian Books.

QUESTION

Compare and contrast the views expressed in Sources 2.2 and 2.3.

With reference to their origin, purpose and content, assess the value and limitations of these two sources for a historian studying British attitudes towards Indians in the colonial period.

QUESTION

Discuss the structure and nature of British rule in India.