

# IMPERIALISM IN INDIA

## A TIMELINE OF BRITISH RULE

The British East India Company arrived in India in the early 1600s, struggling and nearly begging for the right to trade and do business. By the late 1700s the thriving firm of British merchants, backed by its own army, was essentially ruling India.

In the 1800s English power expanded in India, as it would until the mutinies of 1857-58. After those very violent spasms things would change, yet Britain was still in control. And India was very much an outpost of the mighty British Empire.

### **1600s: The British East India Company Arrived**

After several attempts to open trade with a powerful ruler of India failed in the earliest years of the 1600s, King James I of England sent a personal envoy, Sir Thomas Roe, to the court of the Mogul emperor Jahangir in 1614.

The emperor was incredibly wealthy and lived in an opulent palace. And he was not interested in trade with Britain as he couldn't imagine the British had anything he wanted.

Roe, recognizing that other approaches had been too subservient, was deliberately difficult to deal with at first. He correctly sensed that earlier envoys, by being too accommodating, had not gained the emperor's respect. Roe's stratagem worked, and the East India Company was able to establish operations in India.

### **1600s: The Mogul Empire at Its Peak**

The Mogul Empire had been established in India in the early 1500s, when a chieftain named Babur invaded India from Afghanistan. The Moguls (or Mughals) conquered most of northern India, and by the time the British arrived the Mogul Empire was immensely powerful.

One of the most influential Mogul emperors was Jahangir's son Shah Jahan, who ruled from 1628 to 1658. He expanded the empire and accumulated enormous treasure, and made Islam the official religion. When his wife died he had the Taj Mahal built as a tomb for her.

The Moguls took great pride in being patrons of the arts, and painting, literature, and architecture flourished under their rule.

### **1700s: Britain Established Dominance**

The Mogul Empire was in a state of collapse by the 1720s. Other European powers were competing for control in India, and sought alliances with the shaky states that inherited the Mogul territories.

The East India Company established its own army in India, which was composed of British troops as well as native soldiers called sepoys.

The British interests in India, under the leadership of Robert Clive, gained military victories from the 1740s onward, and with the Battle of Plassey in 1757 were able to establish dominance.

The East India Company gradually strengthened its hold, even instituting a court system. British citizens began building an "Anglo-Indian" society within India, and English customs were adapted to the climate of India.

### **1800s: "The Raj" Entered the Language**

The British rule in India became known as "The Raj," which was derived from the Sanskrit term *raja* meaning king. The term did not have official meaning until after 1858, but it was in popular usage many years before that.

Incidentally, a number of other terms came into English usage during The Raj: bangle, dungaree, khaki, pundit, seersucker, jodhpurs, cushy, pajamas, and many more.

British merchants could make a fortune in India and would then return home, often to be derided by those in British high society as *nabobs*, the title for an official under the Moguls.

Tales of life in India fascinated the British public, and exotic Indian scenes, such as a drawing of an elephant fight, appeared in books published in London in the 1820s.

### **1857: Resentment Toward the British Spilled Over**

The Indian Rebellion of 1857, which was also called the Indian Mutiny, or the Sepoy Mutiny, was a turning point in the history of Britain in India.

The traditional story is that Indian troops, called sepoys, mutinied against their British commanders because newly issued rifle cartridges were greased with pig and cow fat, thus making them unacceptable for both Hindu and Muslim soldiers. There is some truth to that, but there were a number of other underlying causes for the rebellion.

Resentment toward the British had been building for some time, and new policies which allowed the British to annex some areas of India exacerbated tensions. By early 1857 things had reached a breaking point.

### **1857-58: The Indian Mutiny**

The Indian Mutiny erupted in May 1857, when sepoys rose up against the British in Meerut and then massacred all the British they could find in Delhi.

Uprisings spread throughout British India. It was estimated that less than 8,000 of nearly 140,000 sepoys remained loyal to the British. The conflicts of 1857 and 1858 were brutal and bloody, and lurid reports of massacres and atrocities circulated in newspapers and illustrated magazines in Britain.

The British dispatched more troops to India and eventually succeeded in putting down the mutiny, resorting to merciless tactics to restore order. The large city of Delhi was left in ruins. And many sepoys who had surrendered were executed by British troops.

### **1858: Calm Was Restored**

Following the Indian Mutiny, the East India Company was abolished and the British crown assumed full rule of India.

Reforms were instituted, which included tolerance of religion and the recruitment of Indians into the civil service. While the reforms sought to avoid further rebellions through conciliation, the British military in India was also strengthened.

Historians have noted that the British government never actually intended to take control of India, but when British interests were threatened the government had to step in.

The embodiment of the new British rule in India was the office of the Viceroy.

### **1876: Empress of India**

The importance of India, and the affection the British crown felt for its colony, was emphasized in 1876 when Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli declared Queen Victoria to be "Empress of India."

British control of India would continue, mostly peacefully, throughout the remainder of the 19th century. It wasn't until Lord Curzon became Viceroy in 1898, and instituted some very unpopular policies, that an Indian nationalist movement began to stir.

The nationalist movement developed over decades, and, of course, India finally achieved its independence in 1947.

# IMPERIALISM

## BRITISH INDIA

### Timeline Questions

1. How and why did the British first become involved in India?
2. What development in Indian history allowed the British to establish greater dominance there, and how did they do it?
3. What prompted an Indian uprising against the British in 1857?
4. Following this uprising, how did British administration and control in India change?

### Video Questions

5. How did the British investment in India contrast with European investment in Africa?
6. Why do you think this is?

### Poem Questions

7. What, according to Kipling, is the “White Man’s Burden”? (Why was their task so burdensome?)
8. What does the political cartoon suggest about the colonial people’s view of this “burden”?