

When the British Ruled India

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Viceroy Lord Canning (seated, second from left) visits Maharaja Ranbir Singh (seated, third from left) of Jammu and Kashmir in 1860. The viceroy was the head of the British administration in India. Image from the public domain

The idea of the British Raj – the British rule over India – is difficult to understand today.

Indian written history stretches back almost 4,000 years. Also, by 1850, India had a population of about 200 million or more.

Britain, on the other hand, had no native written language until the ninth century, almost 3,000 years after India. Its population was just 16.6 million in 1850.

How, then, did Britain manage to control India from 1757 to 1947? The keys seem to have been superior weaponry, a strong thirst for profit, and confidence that Europe was the center of Earth.

Europe's scramble for colonies in Asia

The Portuguese, in 1488, went around the tip of Africa and reached the Indian Ocean, opening sea lanes to trade. From that point on, the European powers aimed to acquire Asian trading posts of their own.

For centuries, traders from Vienna, Austria, controlled the European branch of the Silk Road. They made huge profits on silk, spices, fine china and precious metals. The Viennese monopoly ended with the establishment of the sea-route.

At first, the European powers in Asia were solely interested in trade, but over time, acquiring territory grew in importance.

Soon, Britain was looking for a piece of the action.

The Battle of Plassey (Palashi)



Britain had been trading in India since about 1600. A group of businessmen in London started the British East India Company. As it grew, it started hiring soldiers to guard its interests.

Then, in 1757, there was the Battle of Plassey. This battle pitted 3,000 soldiers of the British East India Company against the 5,000-strong army of Siraj ud Daulah. He was a young Nawab, or leader, of the Indian region Bengal. He had help from soldiers in the French East India Company that wanted power in India as well.

Heavy rain spoiled the Nawab's cannon powder, leading to his defeat. The British East India Company took about \$5 million in today's cash from the Bengali treasury, which they used to expand their army.

India under the East India Company

After the Battle of Plassey, the British East India Company was not just trading, it was the military authority in some sections of India.

By 1770, the company was heavily taxing Bengalis. While British soldiers and traders made huge fortunes, between 1770 and 1773, about 10 million people died of famine in Bengal, or one-third of the population.

At this time, Indians also could not govern their own land, as the British considered them to be untrustworthy.

The Indian Revolt of 1857

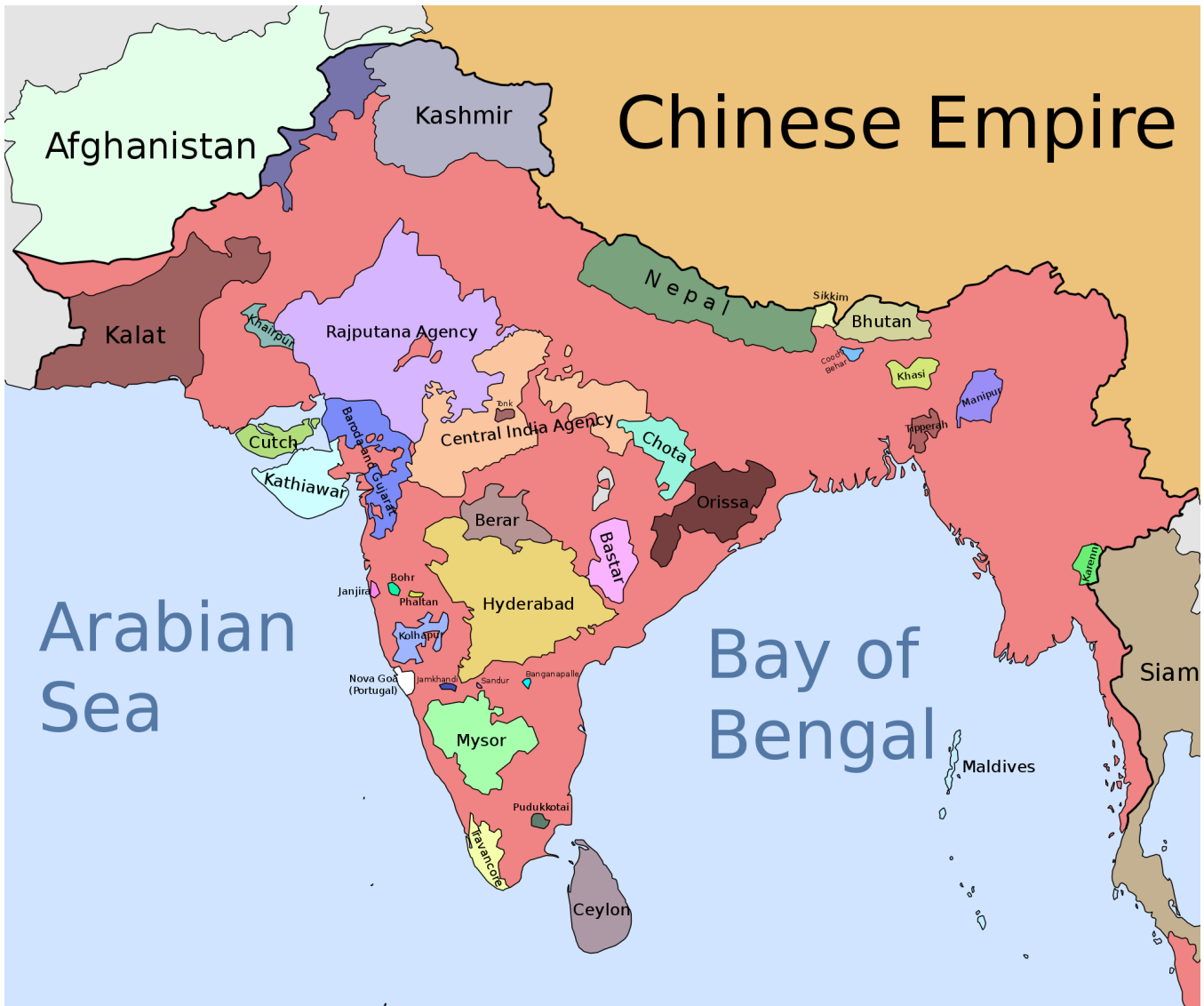
Most people in India followed Hinduism or Islam, and many worried the British would force them to become a Christian nation.

Early in 1857, a new kind of rifle cartridge was given to the soldiers of the British Indian army called the sepoy's.

Rumors spread that the cartridges had been greased with pig and cow fat. This is a disgrace to both major Indian religions. Muslims cannot eat anything that is made from pigs. Hindus believe that cows are holy. But the sepoy's had to bite the paper to open it to release the gunpowder.

On May 10, 1857, the Indian Revolt, or Sepoy Mutiny started. Mainly Bengali Muslim troops marched to Delhi and pledged their support to the Mughal emperor. After a year-long struggle, the rebels surrendered on June 20, 1858.

Control of India shifts to the India Office

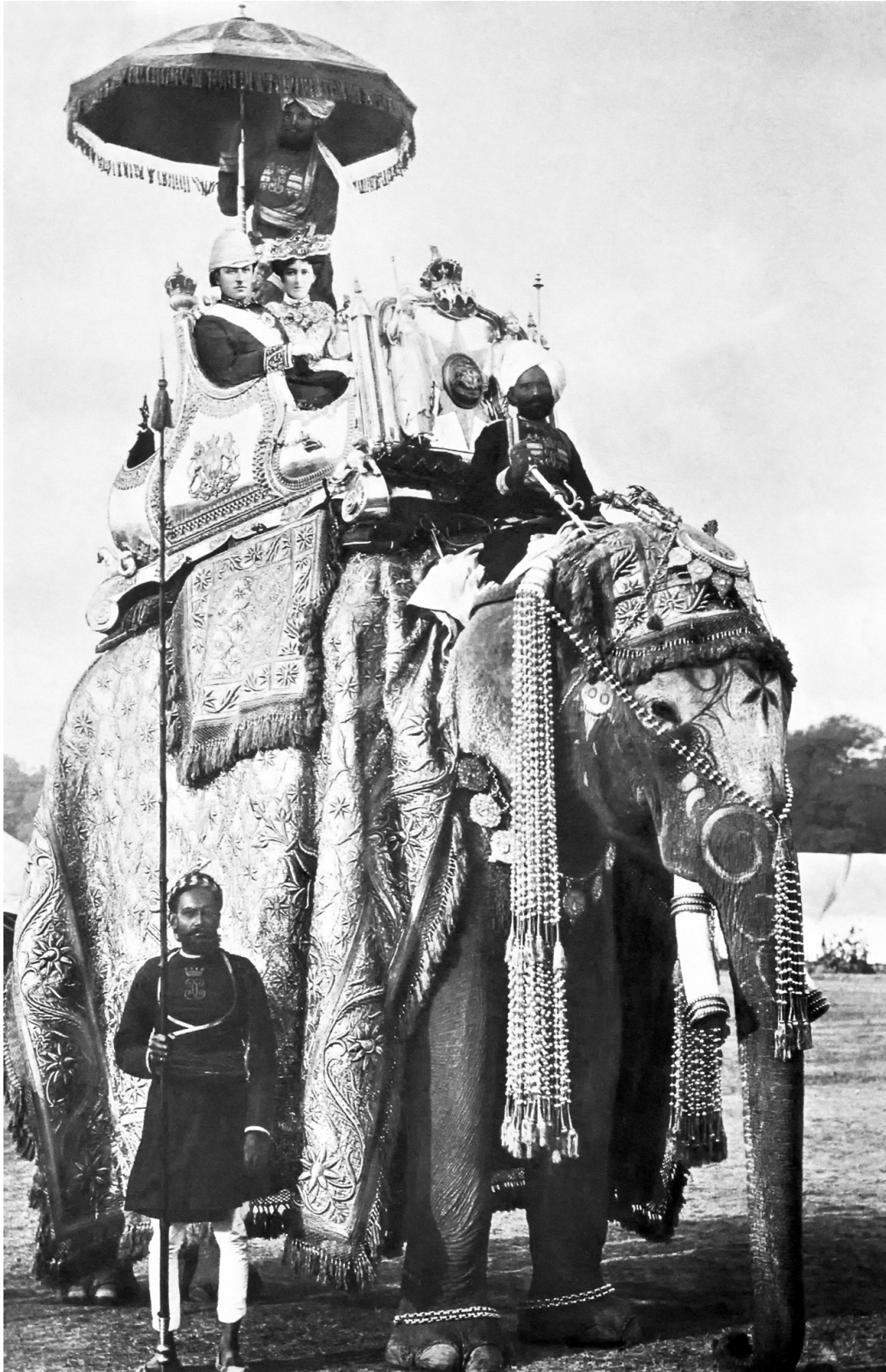


Following the Rebellion, the British government abolished the Mughal dynasty, an Islamic empire that had ruled much of India for 300 years. It also ended the East India Company.

Control of India was given to a British governor-general, who reported back to the British royal government.

The British Raj included about two-thirds of modern India, with the other portions under the control of local princes. However, Britain put much pressure on these princes, effectively controlling all of India.

"Autocratic paternalism"



Queen Victoria promised that the British government would work to "better" the Indian people. To the British, this meant educating them in British thinking and stamping out Indian cultural practices.

The British also practiced "divide and rule" policies, pitting Hindu and Muslim Indians against one another. In 1905, the British colonial government divided Bengal into Hindu and Muslim sections – this division was removed after angry protests.

British India in World War I

During World War I, Britain declared war on Germany on India's behalf, without asking Indian leaders what they wanted. More than 1.3 million Indians were serving in the British Indian army by the end. Some 43,000 of them died.

Although most of India rallied to the British flag, Bengal and Punjab people did not. Many Indians were eager for independence, led by a political newcomer named Mohandas Gandhi.

In April 1919, more than 5,000 unarmed protesters gathered at Amritsar, in the Punjab. British troops fired on the crowd, killing an estimated 1,500 men, women and children. This has been called the Amritsar Massacre.

British India in World War II



In 1939, World War II broke out. By the end of the war, India had an incredible 2.5 million-man volunteer army fighting in it. In addition, Indian states with princes donated large amounts of cash. About 87,000 Indian soldiers died in the combat.

Some Indian people were for the war. Still, the Indian independence movement was very strong by this time, and British rule was widely resented.

The struggle for Indian independence

Even as World War II raged, Gandhi and other activists demonstrated against British rule of India.

The 1935 Government of India Act had allowed some Indians to rule themselves and vote. There was also a framework for a new national Indian government. These moves only made India impatient for true independence from Britain.

In 1942, Britain started negotiating with Gandhi and other leaders more independence in return for soldiers to help in World War II.

Arrests of Gandhi and the INC leadership

Gandhi did not trust the British messengers and demanded immediate independence in return for their cooperation. When the talks broke down, Gandhi and other activists launched the "Quit India" movement. It called for Britain to immediately leave India.



In response, the British arrested the Gandhi, his wife, and other resisters. Huge protests burst out across the country but were crushed by the British army.

The offer of independence had been made, however. Now, it was just a question of when the British Raj would end.

Hindu–Muslim riots, and the Partition

On August 17, 1946, violent fighting broke out between Hindus and Muslims in Calcutta. The trouble quickly spread across India. Meanwhile, Britain announced its decision to withdraw from India by June 1948.

Violence erupted between the religious groups again as independence approached. In June 1947, representatives of the Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs agreed to divide India. Areas with mostly Hindus and Sikhs became the independent country of India. The areas in the north with mostly Muslims became the nation of Pakistan. Years later the country of Bangladesh, which makes up most of Bengal, separated from Pakistan.

This separation of countries is known as the Partition. Millions of refugees flooded across the border in each direction. Between 250,000 and 500,000 people were killed in fighting among ethnic groups as well as between Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs, over territory.

Quiz

- 1 Which sentence introduces how Britain become a huge power in India?
 - (A) How, then, did Britain manage to control India from 1757 to 1947?
 - (B) The Viennese monopoly ended with the establishment of the sea-route.
 - (C) Britain had been trading in India since about 1600.
 - (D) A group of businessmen in London started the British East India Company.

- 2 What is MOST likely the reason why the author included the information about Gandhi's arrest in the article?
 - (A) to show that Indians were able to hold back the British forces
 - (B) to give an example of how peaceful protest can lead to better outcomes
 - (C) to show that Indians stood up to the British despite negative consequences
 - (D) to persuade the reader to believe that the British were not fair in their treatment of Indians

- 3 Which section of the article is BEST illustrated by the image at the beginning of the article?
 - (A) "The Battle of Plassey (Palashi)"
 - (B) "India under the East India Company"
 - (C) "The Indian Revolt of 1857"
 - (D) "Control of India shifts to the India Office"

- 4 How does the image and text in the section "Control of India shifts to the India Office" develop a coherent understanding of British rule over India?
 - (A) It shows how the British were able to use their influence to gain control of India.
 - (B) It provide the reader context about where the regions were located geographically.
 - (C) It gives an example of what a battle scene may have looked like during the past wars.
 - (D) It allows the reader to visualize what the leaders of both sides looked like.