

Brief History of Colonial India

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British Rule in India

The British rule over India changed the course of history in India. The British came to India at the start of the seventeenth century. This was the time when the British East India Company was established in India to break the Dutch monopoly over spice trade. With time the East India Company increased its powers and started to administer the country. However its policies were disliked by Indians and together they revolted against the company. This led to the downfall of the company and the administration of India went directly under the Queen.

The British annexed many princely states and formed laws and policies of their own. Rapidly the entire Indian sub continent came under the British rule. By mid nineteenth century, the British introduced the railways, telegraph and postal service in India. This was a move to establish their rule permanently in India. The first railway line was from Howrah in Calcutta to Raniganj in Bihar. The introduction of telegraph and postal services simplified communication all over the country.

The British passed many acts that were met with dissatisfaction and resentment by the Indians. As a result the Indians formed large groups and revolted against the British. Each movement was brutally crushed the British forces. Leaders like Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, Lala Rajpat Rai, Subhash Chandra Bose, etc. arose and openly condemned the British. They were people's leaders who inspired the masses not to be afraid of the forces.

Finally after 200 years of British rule, India gained independence from them on 15th August, 1947. Many innocent lives were sacrificed for this achievement and India was also separated from Pakistan. The partition of India and Pakistan spread incidents of brutality and horror in both the countries. But due to the effort of numerous Indians, India was able to gain freedom from the British and progress until the present time.

East India Company

The British East India Company was chartered by Queen Elizabeth I for developing trade and commerce with Asia. The principle cause for introducing the British East India Company was to break the monopoly of the Dutch in spice trade with the East Indies. The English East India Company established its first factory in the year 1611 at Machilipatnam located in the Indian state of Andhra Pradesh. The Mughal emperors who were ruling India at that time gave the British unlimited privileges and control over many things in the economy.

The East India Company started to flourish and reap profits from exports. It began to transform from a trading company to a ruling endeavor after it won the battle of Plassey against the ruler of Bengal, Siraj - ud - daullah in the year 1757. Slowly, the company got the rights to collect revenues and taxes from people in place of the Mughal ruler. However, the administration of the East India Company was disastrous and the people turned against them in no time.

During the famine of 1769-70, the East India Company did absolutely nothing to help the people and the state of Bengal was reduced from a rich princely state to an impoverished state. Almost one third of the people died as a result of the famine which triggered off resentment among the rest of the population. The employees of the company were busy saving themselves and were very harsh and greedy.

Though the East India Company had profits in exports and trading, it incurred huge expenses in military maintenance due to which it was evident that the company would be destroyed. The state government intervened in time and gave funds to the company so that it would function like before. In 1773, the Regulating Act was passed which provided the company with greater parliamentary control over the state and placed India under the rule of a Governor General.

Warren Hastings was the first British Governor General to rule India. He expanded the British rule rapidly in India. He was succeeded by Lord Cornwallis in the year 1784. Lord Cornwallis introduced the Permanent Settlement wherein it was stated the British would collect land revenues from the Zamindars till eternity. The East India Company did its best to remove all Indian rivals it had and during the administration of Lord Wellesley the expansion of British Empire took place with ruthless force. It was during his administration that the kingdom of Mysore was annexed after fierce battle with Tipu Sultan and then eventually the state of Punjab was conquered. The East India Company thus had the control over entire India with the annexation of Punjab.

Lord Dalhousie was the next Governor who introduced the Doctrine of Lapse, which agitated the rulers of the princely states. According to the doctrine, a province would automatically go to the British if there is no male heir to the throne. Pensions were stopped and it was announced that rulers after Bahadur Shah would not be given the title of King. All these factors were responsible for triggering the Indians against them and they revolted against the East India Company. Thus, East India Company saw its downfall and the administration of India went directly under the crown.

Indian National Congress

The Indian National Congress was founded in the year 1885. The first session of Congress was presided over by Womesh Chandra Banerjee who was also elected as the first president of Indian National Congress party. Around seventy reputed delegates that included educationalists, lawyers, journalists etc. attended the first session of the congress when it was established. The Indian national congress was considered to be a royal party when it was established.

The Indian National Congress had the following aims and objectives when it was established:

- * Create a feeling of national unity and try to eradicate the notion of race, creed and provincial prejudices.
- * Seek the co-operation of all the Indians in its efforts and allow them to take part in the administrative affairs of the country.
- * Find a solution to the social problems of the country.

Though the Congress was made to improve India, the Muslims were opposed to the party. Muslim leaders like Sir Syed Ahmed Khan and Syed Ameer Ali got invitation to attend the conference when congress party was established but they refused. They also told other Muslims to abstain from joining the party. He predicted that Congress would become a party dominated

by the Hindus. The Congress party was broadly divided among two types of members - the conservatives and the leftists. The former had a cautious approach towards the policies while the latter were more into socialism. During the moderate phase of the congress they were extremely loyal to the British but with time the party entered the extremist phase and expressed its displeasure in the policies of the British.

Revolt of 1857: The Sepoy Mutiny

One of the primary and severe outbursts of resentment against the British rule came in the form of the Indian revolt of 1857. This revolt followed the battles of Plassey and Buxar and the main cause was resentment against setting up of British rule in Bengal. It is called the first war of independence by many historians though it is a debatable topic. The British historians termed it Sepoy Mutiny and Jawaharlal Nehru called it a feudal revolt which was much more than just a Sepoy Mutiny.

The revolt was basically started by the soldiers who worked for the East India Company and later was spread across the country by peasants, artisans and soldiers who sacrificed their lives for the sake of others. Different religions of India came together and fought united for one cause. There were many different reasons for the outbreak of the revolt of 1857. Exploitation by the British, imposing of their faith forcefully on Indians, etc. were just some causes. Some of the other causes are discussed below.

- * Thousands of soldiers were rendered jobless when the northern states were annexed. The able soldiers of kingdoms like Oudh were very frustrated by this move and were waiting to seek revenge.

- * The Indian soldiers employed under the British were made to use a special type of cartridge that was to be bitten off before being loaded in a rifle. It was rumored that the cartridges were greased with cow and pig fat. This angered the Hindus and Muslims as it hurt their religious sentiments.

- * The policy of annexation introduced by Lord Dalhousie was received with much discontent among Indians. Due to the introduction of the new policy, Baji Rao's adopted son Nana Sahib was dispossessed of the pension his father was receiving. It was announced that Bahadur Shah Zafar will not be allowed to stay in the Red Fort anymore and they would have to move to a place near Qutub Minar. It was also announced that the successors of Bahadur Shah would not be given the title of king.

- * The British started to impose Christianity to provoke people further. Taxes were collected from temples and mosques and Hindu and Muslim soldiers were asked to accept the faith of Christianity.

The Freedom Struggle

One of the greatest men in the history of India is Mahatma Gandhi. Mahatma Gandhi played a pivotal role in the freedom struggle of India. His non violent ways and peaceful methods were the foundation for gaining independence from the British.

Mahatma Gandhi was born Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi on 2nd October at Porbandar located in Gujarat. He went off to South Africa after marriage and worked as barrister there for twenty years. In South Africa, he had his first brush with apartheid. Once while he was traveling in a train, he was thrown out of the first class compartment despite having a ticket. This made him swear that he would do his best to erase apartheid from the face of his world. He went back to

India only to find that his own country was being ruled by the British and his fellow citizens were being treated harshly by the British.

Like other great men in history, Gandhi took his time to grow and develop his techniques to ensure that his actions made an impact. His faith in different religions was commendable. He listened to the teachings of Christianity with the same belief and faith he read the Hindu scriptures with. He was brutally honest and truthful and this helped him throughout his life. Some of the major movements and freedom struggles led by him are discussed below.

Non Co-operation Movement

One of the first series of non violent protests nationwide was the non cooperation movement started by Mahatma Gandhi. This movement officially started the Gandhian era in India. In this freedom struggle, the non cooperation movement was basically aimed at making the Indians aware of the fact that the British government can be opposed and if done actively, it will keep a check on them. Thus, educational institutions were boycotted, foreign goods were boycotted, and people let go off their nominated seats in government institutions. Though the movement failed, Indians awakened to the concept of going against the British.

Civil Disobedience Movement

Gandhi again took off with another non violent movement known as the civil disobedience movement. This movement was more active than the non cooperation movement and brought about a revolution of sorts. This movement aimed at bringing the British administration to a stop by withdrawing support from everything. There was agitation against land revenue, abolition of salt tax, cutting down military expenditure, levying duty on foreign cloth, etc. A very important movement was that of Salt Satyagraha where Gandhi undertook the Dandi march as a protest against the Salt tax.

Quit India Movement

The Quit India Movement was launched under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi in August 1942. The main aim for launching this movement was to bring the British to negotiate with the Indian leaders. It was a call for immediate independence of India and the slogan of "Do or Die" was adopted for the same. However the leaders were arrested soon after Gandhi's speech and were put in jail by British officials. Gandhi went on a fast for 21 days demanding the release of the leaders despite his failing health. The British had to secure the release of the leaders.

India Independence

After the Quit India Movement the freedom struggle got even more intense and passionate. Entire India was united together in the movement for freedom. Everyone contributed what they could in the freedom struggle. The cry of Purna Swaraj or complete independence was raised. After much sacrifices and efforts, India gained its independence on the 15th August, 1947.