

## A Concise History of INDIA

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This is a scholarly text, which breaches the issues face on with no sweet-pills for the general reader. It treats history before the Moghuls in a very cursory manner, and spends very little time on the Moghul empire itself, although as they point out on the very first page, the Moghul Empire was really impressive, with perhaps a 100 million subjects, dwarfing the parallel empires of the Ottomans and the Persians. In the 17th and early 18th century, the Moghul empire must have impressed the Europeans, its wealth rivalling those of their own countries, and the magnificence of their courts putting the old ones back home to shame. But the authors do not dwell, they hurry on, continuing with the inauspicious beginnings of the East India company, then chronicling the rise of the English influence and its gradual encroachment and conquest of the subcontinent. One suspects that initially relations between Indians and Westerners were rather respectful, but gradually the English, after having marginalized their erstwhile rivals - the Portuguese and the French, started to feel superior. This superiority was initially founded on liberal values. British parliamentarism was considered the highest form of political governance representative of a superior civilization, thus it was a duty, not easily shirked, to let the Indians become privy to. This is of course not an attitude that differs significantly from our own visavi the Third World. We do indeed want to introduce representative democracy, free capitalist economies, and modern technology, a list more or less identical with that proposed by people like Macaulay, except of course, we are now much more shy of extolling the virtues of Christianity. But things really did not get ugly until the so called Sepoy Mutiny of 1857-58. This really cemented British racial prejudices, and stories about the shiftiness and cruelty of Indians became legio, although this spontaneous and thus badly organised uprising only involved a part of the Indian population, significant parts of it remained loyal and helped to bring it down by force.

As a result of the uprising, the British established their superiority, and although formally they did not rule the entire subcontinent, those Princes that exercised power over their states, did so only at the discretion of the British.

So how could so few govern so many? The standard explanation is that of 'divide and rule' although the English did not have to do so much dividing, that the Indians did very well themselves, they only had to exploit the situation. And then of course, like all colonialization it ultimately rested on superior fire-power.

The English tenure was not to be for ever, even if the British may have thought so, and many fought against the rising tide of independence, not the least Winston Churchill. The bulk of the book charts the rise of nationalism and modern Indian identity, often by referring to minor figures. One gets the suspicion that Hinduism, that claims to have roots going back millenia, actually derives most of its present, seemingly timeless character to revivals initiated in the latter part of the 19th century. The notion of the sacred cow, being a case in point.

Nationalism and its concomitant strife for independence started in earnest at the end of the 19th century with the founding of the Congress party. The First World war out it temporarily on ice, but the massacre at Amritsar inflamed Indian sentiments against the British irrevocably. Gandhi emerged as a national leader with his strategy of passive resistance, and also as an alternative to industrial development and pointing out an Indian way. (Gandhi a Brahmin did in his early years adopt the sophistication of the West in thought as well as clothes, his reincarnation as an ascetic dhoti-clad figure stems from his return from South-Africa in the 20's, already a mature man.) The Second World War brought another check on the inevitable progress. The leading Indians resented having the participation of their country in the War decided over their heads, the result was that many of the leading figures (including Nehru) were thrown in jail. The end of the Second World War left Britain in a tottering state, far from being able to maintain its vast overseas empire. The United States, which at that time was actively anti-colonial, did not encourage out-dated ambitions. The conservative government of Churchill was ousted replaced by one more congenial to the relinquishing of India. Matters moved quickly, and already in 1947 independence was established. An event marred by the growing conflict between Hindus and Muslims, with the leader of the latter - Jinnah, actively pressing for a Muslim state. In the end an agreement was reached, leading to partition and the concomitant massacres of maybe a million people (the figures of which should be compared with the wide-spread famine of the early forties, supposedly callously mismanaged by the British).

Indian history since independence can roughly be divided into two. An initial stage dominated by Nehru and his daughter, in which the country had socialist ambitions (without ever coming under the Soviet influence) and when those were gradually discarded, an economy isolated from that of the world at large. After the assassination of Indira Gandhi, the economic isolation was broken, resulting in the expansion of the middle-class and its resources to modern consumer goods. Ordinary life, which for better and for worse, might have been unchanged for hundreds of years, suddenly came into a great flux. Backwards infrastructures, like roads and telephones were rapidly modernized, inevitably infringing on traditional ways, but still leaving a large part of the population unaffected, providing for the tourist glimpses of the spurious delights of so called traditional lives.

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