

MAP 15.5 | The British in India, 1767-1857

COLONIAL REORDERING IN INDIA

Europe's most important colonial possession in Asia between 1750 and 1850 was British India. Unlike in North America, the changes that the British fostered in Asia did not lead to political independence. Instead, India was increasingly dominated by the **East India Company**, which the crown had chartered in 1600. The company's control over India's imports and exports in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, however, contradicted British claims about their allegiance to a world economic system based on "free trade."

The East India Company's Monopoly In enforcing the East India Company's monopoly on trade, the British soon took control of much of the region. Initially, the British tried to control India's commerce by establishing trading posts along the coast without taking complete political control. After conquering the state of Bengal in 1757, the company began to fill its coffers and its officials began to amass personal fortunes. In spite of violent opposition, the British secured the right for the East India Company to collect tax

revenues in Bengal, Bihar, and Orissa and to trade free of duties throughout Mughal territory. In return, the Mughal emperor would receive a hefty annual pension. The company went on to annex other territories, bringing much of South Asia under its rule by the early 1800s. (See Map 15.5.)

Effects in India Company rule and booming trade altered India's urban geography. By the early nineteenth century, colonial cities like Calcutta, Madras, and Bombay became the new centers at the expense of older Mughal cities like Agra, Delhi, Murshidabad, and Hyderabad. As the colonial cities attracted British merchants and Indian clerks, artisans, and laborers, their populations surged. Calcutta's reached 350,000 in 1820; Bombay's jumped to 200,000 by 1825. In these cities, Europeans lived close to the company's fort and trading stations, while migrants from the countryside clustered in crowded quarters called "black towns."

India now became an importer of British textiles and an exporter of raw cotton—a reversal of its traditional pattern of trade. In the past, India had been an important textile manufacturer, exporting fine cotton goods throughout the Indian Ocean and to Europe.

But its elites could not resist the appeal of cheap British textiles. As a result, India's industrial sector declined. In addition, the import of British manufactures caused unfavorable trade balances that changed India from a net importer of gold and silver to an exporter of these precious metals.

Led by evangelical Christians and liberal reformers, the British did more than alter the Indian economy; they also advocated far-reaching changes in Indian culture. For example, they sought to stop the practice of *sati*, by which women burned to death on the funeral pyres of their dead husbands. Now the mood swung away from the orientalist's respect for India's classical languages, philosophies, cultures, and texts. In 1835, when the British poet, historian, and Liberal politician Lord Macaulay was making recommendations on educational policies, he urged that English replace Persian as the language of administration and that European education replace Oriental learning. The result, reformers hoped, would be a class that was Indian in blood and color but English in tastes and culture.

This was a new colonial order, but it was not stable. Most wealthy landowners resented the loss of their land and authority. Peasants, thrown to the mercy of the market, moneylenders, and landlords and subject to high taxation, were in turmoil. The non-Hindu forest dwellers and roaming cultivators, faced with the hated combination of a colonial state and moneylenders, revolted. Dispossessed artisans stirred up towns and cities. And merchants and industrialists chafed under the British-dominated economy. As freedom expanded in Europe, exploitation expanded in India.

India under Company Rule During the first half of the nineteenth century the British rulers of India had dismantled most of the traditional powers of the nobility and the rights of peasants. Believing that the princely powers and landed aristocracies were out of date, the company instituted far-reaching changes in administration. Lord Dalhousie, upon his appointment as governor-general in 1848, immediately began annexing what had been independent princely domains and stripping native aristocrats of their privileges. Swallowing one princely state after another, the British removed their former allies.

The government also decided to collect taxes directly from peasants, displacing the landed nobles as intermediaries. In disarming the landed nobility, the British threw the retainers and militia of the notables into unemployment, and by demanding high taxes from peasants, the British forced them to rely on moneylenders, who could take ownership of land when peasant proprietors failed to pay. Meanwhile, the company transferred judicial authority to an administration that was insulated from the Indian social hierarchy.

The most prized object for annexation was the kingdom of Awadh in northern India (see Map 16.5). Founded in 1722 by an Iranian adventurer, it was one of the first successor states to have gained a measure of independence from the Mughal ruler in Delhi. With access to the fertile resources of the Ganges Plain, its opulent court in Lucknow was one place where Mughal splendor still survived. In 1765, the company imposed a treaty on Awadh under which the ruler paid an annual tribute for British troops stationed in his territory to “protect” his kingdom from internal and external enemies.

Treaty Violations and Annexation In 1856, citing misgovernment and deterioration in law and order, the East India Company violated its treaty obligations and sent its troops to Lucknow to take control of the province. Nawab Wajid Ali Shah, the poet-king of Awadh, whom the British saw as weak and immoral, refused to sign the treaty ceding control to the British.

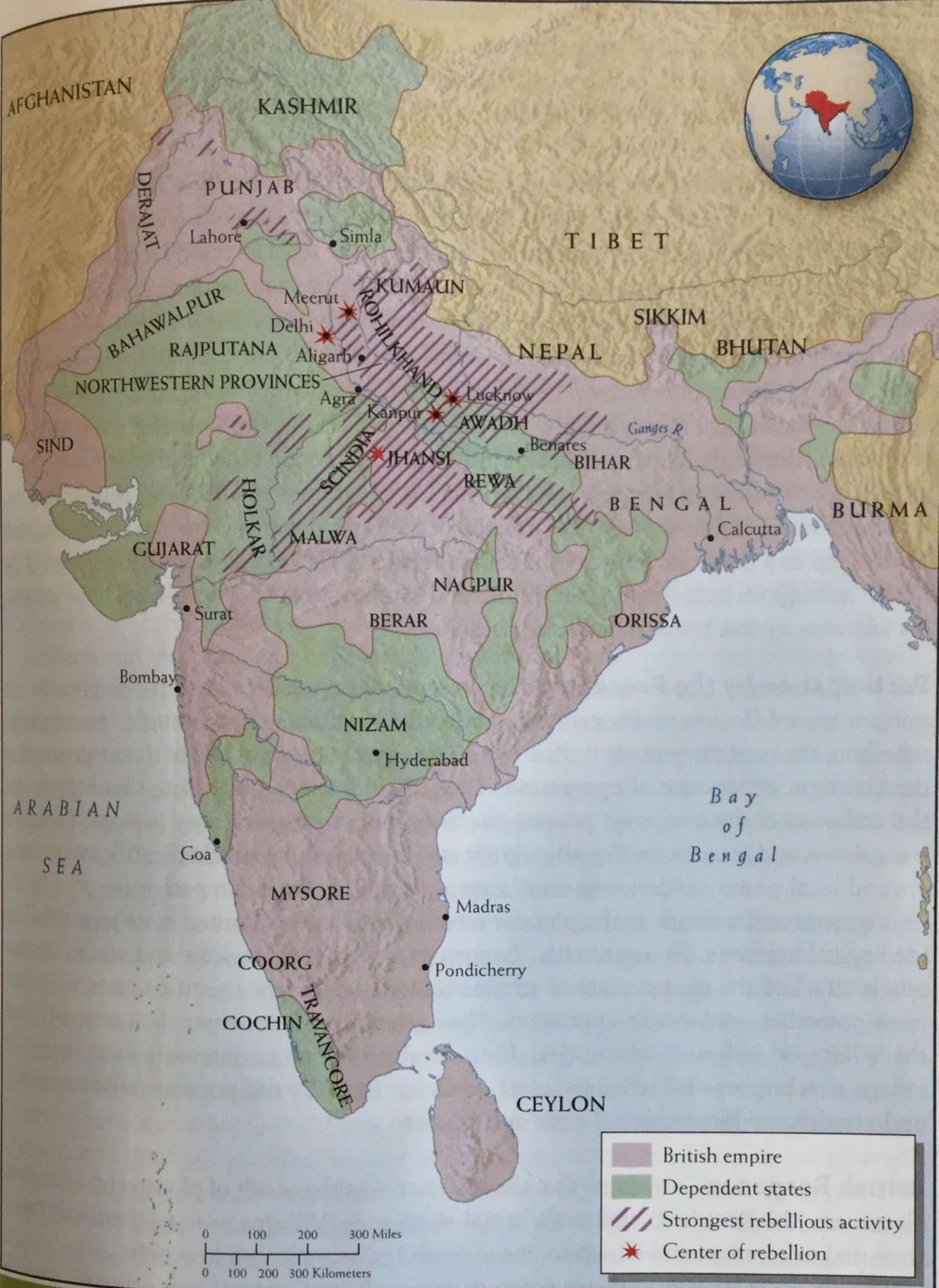
The annexation of princely domains and the abolition of feudal privileges formed part of the developing practices of European imperialism. To the policy of annexation, Dalhousie added an ambitious program of building railroads, telegraph lines, and a postal network to unify the disjointed territory into a single “network of iron sinew” under British control. Dalhousie saw these infrastructures as key to developing India into a productive colony—a supplier of raw materials for British industry, and a market for its manufactures.

A year after Dalhousie’s departure in 1856, India went up in flames. The spark that ignited the simmering discontent into a furious rebellion—the Rebellion of 1857—was the “greased cartridge” controversy. At the end of 1856, the British army, which consisted of many Hindu and Muslim recruits (sepoys) commanded by British officers, introduced the new Enfield rifle to replace the old-style musket. To load the rifle, soldiers had to bite the cartridge open. Although manufacturing instructions stated that linseed oil and beeswax be used to grease the cartridge, a rumor circulated that cow and pig fat had been used. Biting into cartridges greased with animal fat meant violating the Hindu and Muslim sepoys’ religious traditions. The sepoys became convinced that there was a plot afoot to defile them and to compel their conversion to Christianity. So a wave of rebellion spread among the 270,000 Indian soldiers, who greatly outnumbered the 40,000 British soldiers employed to rule over 200 million Indians.

Rebellion Breaks Out The mutiny broke out on May 10, 1857, at the military barracks in Meerut. The revolt soon turned from a limited military mutiny into a widespread civil rebellion that involved peasants, artisans, day laborers, and religious leaders. While the insurgents did not eliminate the power of the East India Company, which managed to retain the loyalty of princes and landed aristocrats in some places, they did throw the



The Indian Sepoys Pictured here are Indian soldiers, or sepoy, who were armed, drilled, and commanded by British officers. The sepoy were drawn from indigenous groups that the British considered to be "martial races." This photograph shows the Sikhs, designated as one such "race."



MAP 16.5 | Indian Rebellion of 1857

The Indian Rebellion of 1857 broke out first among the Indian soldiers of the British army. Other groups soon joined the struggle.

- According to this map, how many centers of rebellion were located in British territory and how many in dependent states?
- Why do you think the rebellion occurred in the interior of the subcontinent rather than along the coasts?
- In what way was the company's expansion into formerly autonomous areas during the first half of the nineteenth century a factor in the rebellion?

company into a crisis. Before long, the mutineers in Delhi issued a proclamation declaring that because the British were determined to destroy the religion of both Hindus and Muslims, it was the duty of the wealthy and the privileged to support the rebellion. To promote Hindu-Muslim unity, rebel leaders asked Muslims to refrain from killing cows in deference to Hindu sentiments.

Although the dispossessed aristocracy and petty landholders led the rebellion, leaders also appeared from the lower classes. Bakht Khan, who had been a junior noncommissioned officer in the British army, became commander-in-chief of the rebel forces in Delhi, replacing one of the Mughal emperor's sons. And Devi Singh, a wealthy peasant, set himself up as a peasant king. Dressed in yellow, the insignia of Hindu royalty, he constituted a government of his own, modeling it on the British administration. While his imitation of company rule showed his respect for the British bureaucracy, he defied British authority by leading an armed peasantry against the hated local moneylenders. The call to popular forces also marked the rebel career of Maulavi Ahmadullah Shah, a Muslim theologian. He stood at the head of the rebel forces in Lucknow, leading an army composed primarily of ordinary soldiers and people from the lower orders. Claiming to be an "Incarnation of the Deity," and thus inspired by divine will, he emerged as a prophetic leader of the common people. He voiced his undying hatred of the British in religious terms, calling on Hindus and Muslims to destroy British rule and warning his followers against betrayal by landed authorities.

Participation by the Peasantry The presence of popular leadership points to the important role of the lower classes. Although feudal chieftains often brought them into the rebellion, the peasantry made it their own. The organizing principle of their uprising was the common experience of oppression. Thus, they destroyed anything that represented the authority of the company: prisons, factories, police posts, railway stations, European bungalows, and law courts. Equally significant, the peasantry attacked native moneylenders and local power-holders who were seen as benefiting from company rule.

Vigorous and militant as the popular rebellion was, it was limited in its territorial and ideological horizons. To begin with, the uprisings were local in scale and vision. Peasant rebels attacked the closest seats of administration and sought to settle scores with their most immediate and visible oppressors. They generally did not carry their action beyond the village or collection of villages. Their loyalties remained intensely local, based on village attachments and religious, caste, and clan ties. Nor did popular militants seek to undo traditional hierarchies of caste and religion.

British Response Convinced that the rebellion was the result of plotting by a few troublemakers, the British reacted with brutal vengeance. Villages were torched, and rebels were tied to cannons and blown to bits to teach Indians a lesson in power.

By July 1858, the vicious campaign to restore British control had achieved its goal. Yet, in August, the British Parliament abolished company rule and the company itself, and transferred responsibility for the governing of India to the crown. In November, Queen Victoria issued a proclamation guaranteeing religious toleration, promising improvements, and allowing Indians to serve in the government. She promised to honor the treaties and agreements with princes and chiefs and to refrain from interfering in religious matters. The insurgents had risen up not as a nation, but as a multitude of communities acting independently; their determination to find a new order shocked the British and threw them into a panic. Having crushed the uprising, the British resumed the work of transforming India into a modern colonial state and economy. But the desire for radical alternatives and traditions of popular insurgency, though vanquished, did not vanish.

INDIA AND THE IMPERIAL MODEL

The pioneering model of European empire-building to enhance domestic grandeur and extend overseas markets was Britain's imperial regime in India. In India, British expansion did not lead to territorial incorporation, nor were colonial subjects sup-

*source of new lands
means of dealing with
stated at home.*

posed to become part of a national citizenry. The British experience of ruling India provided lessons to a generation of colonial officials in Africa and other parts of Asia.

In India, methods of rule also were responses to popular discontent. Having suppressed the Indian Rebellion of 1857 (see Chapter 7), authorities revamped the colonial administration. Indians were not to be appeased—and certainly not brought into British public life.

territorial incorporation = means Britain didn't make Indian territory an official part of Britain

appeased = won over, indulged. Point here is that British didn't think they had much chance of really being able to satisfy Indians.

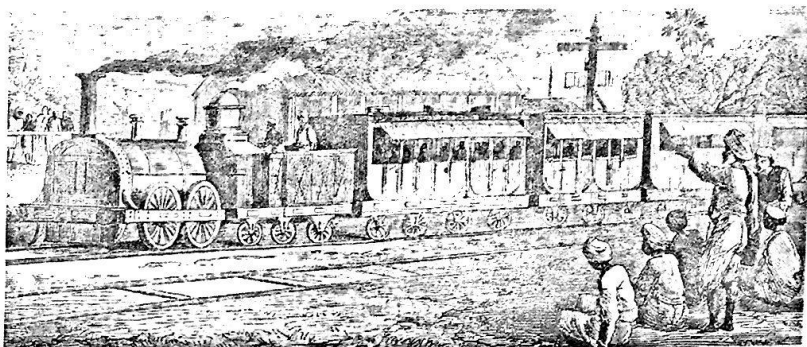
→ *What were the motives for imperialism and the practices of colonial rulers?*

But they did have to be governed, and with an iron fist. So, immediately after suppressing the rebellion and replacing East India Company rule by crown government in 1858, the British set out to make India into a more secure and productive colony, vesting authority in Her Majesty's viceroy, who was responsible to the secretary of state for India, a member of the British Cabinet. As the colonial state expanded its reach over the next several decades, the British referred to their administration of India simply as "the Raj"—a term that literally means "rule"—and provided a system for the transformation of India from private exploitation into a nationally useful colony for Britain as a whole.

The most urgent task facing the British in India was that of modernizing the subcontinent's transportation and communication system and transforming the country into an integrated colonial state. These changes had begun under Lord Dalhousie, the governor-general of the Company. During his eight-year tenure, Dalhousie oversaw the development of India's modern infrastructure. When he left office in 1856, he boasted that he had harnessed India to the "great engines of social improvement—I mean Railways, uniform Postage, and the Electric Telegraph." A year later, northern India exploded in the 1857 rebellion. But the rebellion also demonstrated the military value of railroads and telegraphs. After the British suppressed the revolt, they took up the construction of public works with renewed vigor. The railways formed a key element in this project, attracting approximately £150 million of British capital during the nineteenth century. Though the capital came from British investors, Indian taxpayers paid off the debt through their taxes. Beginning with the opening of the first railway line in 1853, the subcontinent had 30,627 miles of railway track in operation by 1910, making the Indian railways the fourth largest railway system in the world.

The construction of other public works followed. Military engineers built dams across rivers to tame their force and to channel the water to irrigate lands; workers installed a grid of telegraph lines that made communication possible between distant parts of the subcontinent. As the nineteenth century progressed, the British planned and put into place one project after another to shore up the foundations of their rule.

These public works also had an economic purpose: India was to become a consumer of British manufactures and a supplier of primary staples like cotton, jute, tea, wheat, and vegetable oil seeds. The control of India's massive rivers allowed farmers to cultivate the rich floodplains, converting large areas into lucrative cotton-producing provinces. On the hillsides of the island of Ceylon and the northeastern plains of India, the British established vast plantations to grow tea, which was then marketed in England, especially by the firm Lipton's, as a healthier alternative to Chinese green tea. Independent farmers, indentured laborers, and others under various other property systems produced these staples. Peasant producers, however, rarely saw the full returns from their labors. India also became an important consumer of British manufactures, especially textiles, which was ironic given India's cen-



Sinews of the Raj. (Top) During the second half of the nineteenth century, the British built an extensive system of railroads to develop India as a profitable colony, and to maintain military security. This engraving shows the East India Railway around 1863. (Bottom) The British allowed several native princes to remain so long as they accepted imperial paramountcy. This photograph shows a road-building project in one such princely state. Officials of the Muslim princely ruler and British advisers supervise the workers.

turies-old tradition of producing and exporting cotton and silk textiles. In an effort to bolster sales, the British removed economic protections that benefited local textile producers—with only mixed results, as Indian entrepreneurs found ways to set up their own modern factories to rival British products.

India recorded a consistent surplus in its foreign trade through the export of agricultural goods and raw materials. But what India gained from its trade to the world it lost to Britain, its colonial master. India was forced to use its export surplus to pay for "home charges," such as interest on railroad loans, salaries to colonial officers on furlough in Britain, and the maintenance of imperial troops outside India. "Home charges" meant that India ended up balancing Britain's huge trade deficits with the rest of the world, especially the Americas. Favorable trade with India helped Britain retain its financial might and sustain the international gold standard.

vesting = putting
viceroy = colonial ruler (who rules on behalf of king or queen)
shore up = solidify

bolster = boost, improve
surplus = they sold more goods than they bought.
huge trade deficits = they bought more than they sold.

Nonetheless, administrative programs had the effect of making India into a unified territory and enabling its inhabitants to regard themselves as "Indians." India had taken the first steps to becoming a "nation"—like Italy and the United States. There were, of course, profound differences: Indians lacked a single national language, and they were not citizens of their political community able to enjoy a semblance of sovereignty. Rather, they were colonial subjects ruled by outsiders.

Semblance of sovereignty = degree of independence