



Indian History Independence



The date was August 14, 1947. A drenching rain was falling in New Delhi. But the thousands of Indians crowded outside the Assembly building ignored the weather. They were listening to a dignified man speak these words:

“At the stroke of the midnight hour, while the world sleeps, India will awake to life and freedom .. A moment comes, which comes but rarely in history, when we step out from the old to the new, when an age ends, and when the soul of a nation, long suppressed, finds utterance.”

The speaker was Jawaharlal Nehru (juh WAH huhr lahl NAY roo), the first prime minister of India, just hours before India's independence.

Indian Independence

Since the mid-1700's Britain had controlled India and had made many changes there. Some of these changes, such as the abolition of slavery and the construction of a large railroad network, benefited India. Other changes, however, did not.

Before the Europeans arrived, India had a flourishing textile industry. The Indians were among the first people in the world to grow cotton. Indian artisans produced new fabrics such as calico, cashmere, chintz, and muslin. The British, however, wanted to use India as a market for their own cheaper, machine-made textiles. They imported raw cotton from India, made it into cloth, and shipped the cloth back to India for sale. As a result, India's textile industry was almost completely wiped out, and millions of people lost their livelihoods.

In addition the British, like other colonizers, did not treat their subjects as equals. For example, both the government and the army were organized with British officials in positions of power and Indians at the lower levels. The situation understandably caused anger and resentment among some Indians.

MOHANDAS GANDHI

During the late 1800's, Indians became more familiar with their own history and developed a stronger sense of nationalism. In addition, Western ideas of individual rights and self-government began to spread among the country's English-speaking middle class – its lawyers, doctors, and teachers. Many middle-class Indians traveled to England to study during this time. One of these men was a young law student named Mohandas Gandhi (moh HAHN das GAHN dee). It was Gandhi - later called Mahatma, meaning “the Great Soul” – who led India through its great struggle toward independence.



Gandhi's belief in using nonviolent resistance against injustice was his most powerful weapon against the British. Nonviolent resistance means opposing an enemy or oppressor by any means other than violence. Gandhi believed that peace and love were more powerful forces than violence. Everywhere he went, he won the hearts of the Indian people.

One way that Gandhi peacefully resisted British rule was to boycott – refuse to purchase or use – British cloth. Gandhi stopped wearing Western clothes, and instead wore clothes made from yarn he had spun himself. He devoted two hours each day to spinning his own yarn and urged other Indians to follow his example. The spinning wheel became a symbol of national pride. As a result of Gandhi's leadership and the boycott by the Indian people, the sale of British cloth in India fell sharply.

Gandhi's program of nonviolent resistance developed into a mass movement involving millions of Indians. In spite of Gandhi's pleas to avoid violence, however, some protests against British rule led to riots. Hundreds of people were killed or hurt. Gandhi and his followers attracted sympathy in many parts of the world. In 1935 the British gave into mounting Indian and international pressures and agreed to establish provinces that were governed entirely by Indians. Mohandas Gandhi is credited as the single most influential person in India's independence movement.

Religious Conflict

For hundreds of years, the relationship between India's Hindus and Muslims had often been hostile. In the early 1940's the conflict between the two groups deepened. Economic differences divided the two groups. The Muslims were generally the poorer peasants or land less workers, while the Hindus were often landowners.

For a time, Hindus and Muslims worked together for independence. But as they drew nearer to their goal, both groups began to fear being ruled by the other. In 1946 Britain offered independence to India on condition that Indian leaders could agree on a form of government. But Hindus and Muslims were unable to reach an agreement. Riots broke out in which thousands of people died.

Gandhi yearned for a united India, but the violence persisted. Finally, in 1947 British and Indian leaders agreed that the only solution to the conflict was to partition – divide into parts – the subcontinent into separate Hindu and Muslim countries. Part of the subcontinent became the mostly Hindu Republic of India. The northwestern and northeastern parts of the subcontinent, where most Muslims lived, formed the nation of Pakistan.

Partition Brings Further Violence

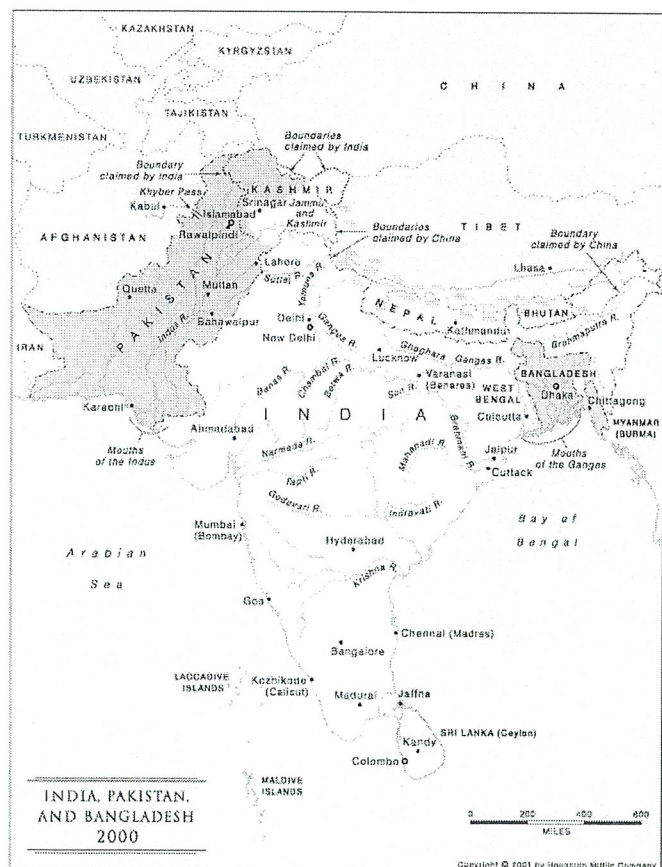
India and Pakistan finally became independent countries on August 15, 1947. The event brought joyous scenes of celebration. But independence also brought confusion and suffering. In one of the greatest migrations of refugees in history, 12 million people moved – Hindus to India, Muslims to Pakistan. They moved to avoid being

ruled by those who adhered to a majority religion to which they did not belong. For many, the journey was long and torturous. Ashwini Kumar, a young police officer who witnessed the migration, stated:

“They passed in eerie silence. They did not look at each other ... The creak of wooden wheels, the weary shuffling of thousands of feet, were the only sounds rising from the columns.”

Most of the refugees were forced to leave their possessions along the road or give them away in exchange for lifesaving water. Many people, weakened by hunger, thirst, or exhaustion, died. In addition, an estimated one million were killed in the fighting between Hindus and Muslims. Life as a refugee was extremely difficult and dangerous.

Since independence, India and Pakistan have fought two wars. In 1965 India was forced to defend its northern border against Pakistan. The second war, in 1971, led to the creation of the new country of Bangladesh. Their continuing dispute over territory has led to both nations developing nuclear weapons.



Indian History - Independence

Reading Review Questions

1. What important benefits did British control of India bring to the Indian people?

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2. What changes or conditions brought on by British control did not benefit the people of India?

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3. How did Mohandas Gandhi help to lead the people of India to independence?

4. What were the reasons for the partitioning of India in 1947?

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5. How were the problems solved?

6. How could have Britain improved upon the 'hand-over,' or giving of independence, of India?
