Origins of the Indian Independence Movement

Although the British have long argued that their colonial rule in the subcontinent brought India and Pakistan into the modern world and prepared a backward people for democratic rule, the record of India’s two-hundred-year experience with European occupation suggests a far different story.

The gradual expansion of the English East India Company’s rule and control of India after 1757 was aimed at making a profit by exporting India’s raw materials to Britain for processing and exporting finished products like cloth back to India to be sold in a closed market. The result of this policy was the dramatic decline of India’s cloth export trade which, for centuries, had made India the cloth merchant of the world.

In 1750, on the eve of British control, India and China produced about two-thirds of the world’s manufacturing. By 1947, when India gained independence from Great Britain, that once powerful center was producing about 2 percent of the world’s manufacturing. This “deindustrialization” and de-urbanization of the Indian subcontinent left the newly-independent India with a population about 85 percent rural and few basic industries on which to achieve rapid development.

Moreover, the British cultural policy of racism after the uprising of 1857 practically stopped the liberal reforms advocated by some British leaders. This racist policy saw Hindus and Muslims as biologically and culturally inferior and not fit or ready for self-rule. The British cultural policy of racism also included a gendered division of peoples. The British saw themselves as masculine, strong, powerful, rational, and capable of democratic governance. Conversely, the British regarded most Indians as feminine, feeble, non-rational, cowardly, and incapable of democratic self-rule. It was not surprising that Gandhi would later argue that “The British say we are as weak as women, but we will show them that we are as strong as women.”

The land reforms introduced by the British led to a new kind of land tenancy whereby a new class of landlords (Zamindars) grew in power, leading to the impoverishment of peasant farmers. With the introduction of a more money-oriented economy and British property law, millions of Indian peasants were caught in endless legal battles and endured life-long indebtedness to unscrupulous money lenders.

Finally, the British policy of “divide and rule” turned Muslims against Hindus, resulting in two parallel nationalist movements based on religious affiliation. This situation ultimately led to the creation of two new states, Islamic Pakistan and a predominantly Hindu India.

During the nineteenth century, the disparate strands of anti-British sentiment began to coalesce around a genuine nationalist movement. This culminated in the founding of the Indian Nationalist Congress in 1885. As in the case of most other nationalist movements among colonized peoples, some Indian reformers, for example Ram Mohan Roy, wanted to copy certain Western forms and values and cleanse Hinduism of its many rituals and beliefs and move it toward monotheism. Roy also argued that caste, idol worship, and discrimination against women had no real basis in Hinduism. The Brahmo Samaj was one important reform organization that grew out of this tradition. At the same time, other reformers, such as Dayanand Saraswati (1824- 1883), believed that all truths were contained in the Vedas and that Hindus should return to their basic historic values as a way to combat the intrusions of the British. The Arya Samaj was one important reform religious group that grew out of this tradition.

Besides the debates over the proper response of Hinduism to the impact of the West, nationalists argued over the use of violence. Nationalists like Bal Gangadhar Tilak (1856-1920) argued for immediate freedom (swaraj) and urged the use of violence to achieve it. On the opposite end of the spectrum, reformers like Gokhale wanted to rely on law and a gradual movement toward independence. After 1915, when Gandhi returned to India from South Africa, the Indian National Congress began to reach all areas of the subcontinent and to attract workers and peasants. No longer a club of British-trained lawyers, the new nationalist movement enrolled masses of people.

The nation that the Gandhian wing of the Congress Party imagined was one where the industrialists would hold wealth in stewardship and follow a strict set of ethics in dealing with labor. Gandhi imagined a nation of small villages rather than a nation of large cities. He also imagined one “Mother India” unbroken by partition between Muslims and Hindus. Sadly for his followers, modern India achieved independence in 1947 but that same year broke into two states, the post-partition India, under the leadership of Jawaharlal Nehru, and Pakistan.

Figure 1 Jawaharlal Nehru and Mohandas Gandhi

1. What was the economic impact of British rule?
2. How did racism justify British rule?
3. What was the British policy of "divide and rule"?
4. What were two religious responses to British rule?
5. What options were considered to move to Indian independence?
6. What was the economic impact of British rule?
The British East India Company was interested in making money and supporting the British industrialization. This meant that the local Indian industry was slowly made to fall in line to British needs. Instead of Indian maintaining the strong Indian cloth making industry, it was transformed to just producing cotton for British manufacturing. Thus Indian was de-industrialized through colonization. It slowly moved Indian peasants into further poverty.
7. How did racism justify British rule?
British racism saw Indians as inferior by characterizing them as weak and politically “backward”, therefore they supposedly needed British rule to help them progress.
8. What was the British policy of "divide and rule"?
The British turned the people of the India against each other by dividing them along religious lines.
9. What were two religious responses to British rule?
Indian responded to British culture by either conforming to the challenges of British culture or holding strong to their culture in defiance of the new culture.
10. What options were considered to move to Indian independence?
Tilak promoted the use of violence as a response to the British colonization. Gokhale was a gradualist who wanted to work within the system to gain independence. Gandhi’s vision was one that countered British imperialism by seeking independence, empowering Indian industry, and removing the British legacy of “divide and conquer”.