

Historical Context: India in the early 1900s

Directions: Read through the text below and answer the questions that follow.

The British East India Company

British involvement in India started in the 1600s with the **British East India Company**, a trading company that was supported by the British government. The British East India Company made an agreement with the **Mughal Empire** that ruled most of India and set up trading forts on the coast. Between the early 1600s and 1857, the British East India Company gained influence, power and territory in India. They took power through force and agreements with Indian rulers. The Company's power reached its height in 1857 when Indian soldiers employed by the British East India Company rebelled in what is known as the **Sepoy Rebellion**. The uprising lasted over a year. In the end, the British defeated the sepoys and took control over India once again.

British Rule

As a result of the British East India Company's inability to control India, the Company was replaced by the British government sometimes called the **British Raj**. India became an official British colony and was known as the "jewel in the crown" of the British Empire because it was the largest and most profitable colony in the empire. The British government continued to administer India as the Company had, with strict control. They also exiled the last Mughal ruler and executed his sons.

The Raj's policy has been described as one of "divide and rule." This partly refers to the way in which much territory was acquired, by playing one Indian ruler against another. The British also used the "divide and rule" concept to govern India's Muslim and Hindu populations. There is a long history of animosity between the Muslim and Hindu populations in South Asia that is often traced back to the founding of the Mughal Empire and specifically the practices of the Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb. The British argued that it was necessary for them to control the Indians because without their presence, the Muslims and Hindus would kill each other. For example, in 1905, the British divided the province of Bengal into East Bengal for Muslims, and West Bengal for Hindus. Both sides resented British involvement and accused them of favoring the other religion. The action led to more religious riots in Bengal. The British gave up on dividing Bengal and the area continued to experience religious violence.

Under the British Raj, after the Sepoy Rebellion, British attitudes toward Indians shifted from relative openness to insularity and racism. British families and their servants lived in military installations at a distance from Indian settlements. Private clubs where the British gathered for social interaction became symbols of exclusivity and snobbery.

Indian Economy During the British Raj

The British united India as one colony and set about modernizing and westernizing the region and its people. They built railway, transport, and communication systems that helped to knit the previously independent regions of India into a whole. This helped the British stay informed about activities in the colony, keep control of it, and transport raw materials from which they profited. Some of the modernization associated with the industrial revolution benefited India during this period. Foreign investors set up jute mills around Calcutta, and Indian merchants set up cotton textile factories in Gujrat and around Bombay. However, this was accompanied by the collapse of traditional industry, which faced ferocious competition from cheap British-made goods.

Post-1857, India also experienced a period of unprecedented calamity when the region was swept by a series of frequent and devastating famines, among the most catastrophic on record. Approximately 25 major famines spread through India in the latter half of the nineteenth century, killing 30–40 million Indians. Some modern scholars attributed the famines both to uneven rainfall and British economic and administrative policies. For example, the British seized local farmland and converted it to foreign-owned plantations that grew cash crops that were exported for profit rather than food that could have been used to feed the local population.

The British also instituted an education system in India that was based on their own. Upper class Indians learned to read and write in English, studied medicine, British government and law, and sometimes traveled to England for higher education.

1. Why was India considered the “jewel in the crown” of the British Empire?	4. What effects did British rule have on the Indian economy?
2. Historically, what has been the relationship between Hindus and Muslims in India? How did the British use this to gain, consolidate, and maintain their power?	
3. According to the text, how did most British people feel about Indians after the Sepoy Rebellion?	5. What effect did the British have on the Indian education system?