

Case study: India's colonial legacy

The British ruled the Indian subcontinent from 1858 to 1947. The area over which control was exercised extended over much of present-day India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. The British monarch bore the title of Empress or Emperor of India. British control of India had both positive and negative long-term consequences for the subcontinent.

British control of India

Britain's interest in India can be traced to the activities of the East India Company during the first half of the eighteenth century. Initially, the company established a trading presence along the subcontinent's coast. This presence expanded in the latter half of the century, when the British waged a war against regional rulers on land in eastern and south-eastern India. The outcome was Britain's ability to exercise political control over the rich province of Bengal.

By the end of the century, British rule had been consolidated and extended up the Ganges valley to Delhi and over most of the peninsula of southern India. The British had by then established a military superiority that would enable them to extend control over all the remaining Indian states, either by conquering them or by forcing their rulers to become accommodating allies.

During the period of British control, India comprised two types of territory: British India and the native Princely States. The control of the latter was exercised through indigenous Indian rulers by the central government led by a Viceroy—the official appointed to administer India in the name of the British monarch. British India consisted of provinces administered by British-appointed governors, lieutenant governors or chief commissioners.

Legacy of British rule

British rule had a number of enduring benefits. These include:

- the unification of more than 550 Princely States into a single political entity that would ultimately form the foundation of an independent India, Pakistan and Bangladesh.
- the establishment of parliamentary democracy built on the principles of one-person, one-vote; the rule of law; and an independent judiciary
- a system of public administration—the 1000-strong Indian Civil Service provided the foundations for strong, efficient government after independence

- the establishment of universities and stock exchanges
- education for both males and females
- the building of transport infrastructure, especially ports, dams, irrigation canals, roads and railways, as well as communications technologies such as telephone and telegraph, which later helped India to modernise
- the introduction of the English language, which provided a source of unity for the subcontinent
- the banning of the caste system and attempted abolition of a range of cultural practices, including *sati* (the custom of widow burning) and infanticide (the killing of infants).

The costs of British rule included economic exploitation. Before the British occupied India, the country was one of the richest countries in the world. When the British left in 1947, India was poor and industrially backward. The British had restricted the development of any industry that would compete with those back in England. India's role was to supply the raw materials needed by Britain's factories (for example cotton) and a market for its manufactured products (cloth). Britain extracted large trade surpluses from India, and forced it to export commodities and become a dumping ground for British manufactured goods.

Many people believe that India's bureaucracy—a legacy of British colonialism—has held back the Indian economy for more than four decades through its insistence on time-consuming bureaucratic processes ('red tape'). Bureaucratic processes have also discouraged foreign investment in the country.

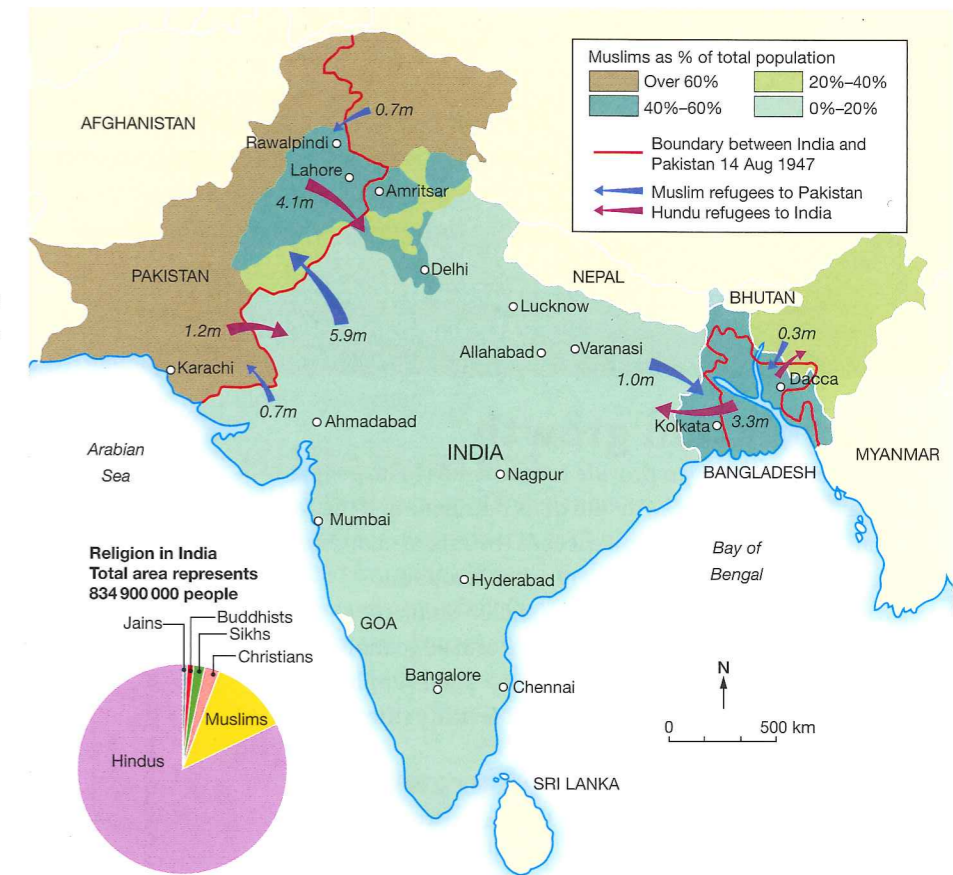
The manner in which the British withdrew from India created political instability and initiated an arms race in the region. This instability detracts from efforts to enhance human wellbeing.

Partition of British India

In 1947, the British Indian Empire was partitioned (or divided) into two sovereign states—India and Pakistan (which later split into the Islamic Republic of Pakistan and the People's Republic of Bangladesh), as shown in Figure 7.14. This partition involved more than just the division of territory. It involved the division of the Empire's assets, including the British Indian Army, the Indian Civil Service and other administrative services, the railways and treasury. The haste with which the partition of India occurred resulted in the mass displacement of people and outbreaks of religious-based violence. As many as 1 million people died. Once the new borders were established, about 14.5 million people crossed into what they hoped was the relative safety of a religious majority—Islam-dominated Pakistan or Hindu-dominated India, as shown in Figure 7.15.

The partition of the British Indian Empire was a highly controversial arrangement, and remains a cause of much tension on the Indian subcontinent today. It has hindered efforts to enhance the human wellbeing of people within the region.

7.14 The partition of India



7.15 Crowded Indian train during the partition of India



ACTIVITIES

Knowledge and understanding

- 1 State the duration and extent of British colonial control of India.
- 2 Outline the benefits of British colonial control of India.
- 3 Explain how the British hindered India's economic development.
- 4 Outline the costs of the partition of India.

Applying and analysing

- 5 Draw a mind map of the benefits and costs of British colonial rule in India.
- 6 Create a KWL chart on the partition of India and how this has contributed to political instability in the region.

Geographical skills

- 7 Study Figure 7.14. Using information from the map, write a report outlining the movement of people as a result of the partition of India in 1947. In doing so, explain these movements.