

Leila Zelman

Rise and Fall of Empires

Mr. Breault

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The Sun Never Sets on the British Empire: The Colonization of India

In the 21st century, Britain is known as a washed-out mess of politics that can't decide whether it is a monarchy or a democracy, but it once was the largest and possibly the strongest Empire the world has ever seen. Britain conquered 25% of all land mass on earth, with at least one colony on every continent except Antarctica.¹ However, with the money and influence that were linked to their extensive power came the dark side of expansion, colonialism. Whether through systematic manipulation of a colony's infrastructure or capitalization of a territory's people, Britain demonstrated time and time again that its greed and corruption irreparably ruined countries, people, and cultures. The colonization of India is no different, and is a prime example of British Imperialism's lasting effect on the cultures it oppressed.

In 1690, Britain extended imperial expansion to the east for trade, establishing the formidable East India Trading Company (The Company). The British quickly established a base at Calcutta because Britain was threatened by Dutch, French, and Portuguese colonization in the surrounding areas. Originally, the British had no intent to colonize India, but competition with other powerful countries for land, power, and money made them hungry for increased control, slowly becoming more and more powerful.² Over a period of about 100 years, British presence, power, and political influence increased, and the native Mughal power declined. Once the richest nation in the world, the Mughal empire folded in on itself due to increased political tension with colonizing empires and internal conflicts. The Mughals were plagued with

¹ Chandler, Gemma. "British Empire Facts!" National Geographic Kids, February 12, 2025. <https://www.natgeokids.com/uk/discover/history/general-history/british-empire-facts/>.

² Blackwell, Fritz. "The British Impact on India, 1700–1900 - Association for Asian Studies." Association for Asian Studies. Accessed December 15, 2025. the ,<https://www.asianstudies.org/publications/eaar/archives/the-british-impact-on-india-1700-1900/>.

controversies surrounding their leader, Aurangzeb, who was known for the mistreatment of non-muslims, causing tensions within the empire as well.³

As the British gained more control over India, the French were becoming a force in the region. As a result, the British fortified Calcutta, specifically, Fort William, in order to defend against French invasion and attack. The fortification made the Nawab (provincial Governor) of Bengal, Siraj-ud-daula, irate, so he called for the invasion of Calcutta with 50,000 troops. When the Nawab's troops invaded in 1756, an incident known as the "Black Hole of Calcutta" occurred. The troops invaded Fort William and overwhelmed all resistance in Calcutta's surrounding establishments. The British governor of Calcutta and his British residents fled for ships waiting in the harbor, leaving "A total of 146 British prisoners, including two women and several wounded men...were herded at sword-point for the night into the fort's 'black hole'".⁴ Throughout the night, many people suffocated, leaving only 23 prisoners to survive.⁵ This incident led to the Battle of Plassey. On June 23, 1757, the conflict with the British East India Company and the Nawab of Bengal, Sirāj al-Dawlā, came to a head in an eight-hour battle. The battle was won by the outnumbered British, who capitalized on the betrayal of people in the Nawab's ranks.⁶ This miracle of a victory was a turning point in Britain's power, and they were able to install British-aligned Mir Ja'far as the new Nawab. When the British defeated the

³ Carey, William L. "Indian Timeline (1510-1947 A.D.)." Indian timeline (1510-1947 A.D.). Accessed December 15, 2025. <https://www.thelatinlibrary.com/imperialism/notes/indianchron.html>.

⁴ Richard Cavendish | Published in History Today Volume 56 Issue 6 June 2006. "The Black Hole of Calcutta." History Today. Accessed December 15, 2025. <https://www.historytoday.com/archive/months-past/black-hole-calcutta>.

⁵ Richard Cavendish | Published in History Today Volume 56 Issue 6 June 2006. "The Black Hole of Calcutta." History Today. Accessed December 15, 2025. <https://www.historytoday.com/archive/months-past/black-hole-calcutta>.

⁶ "Battle of Plassey: Research Starters: EBSCO Research." EBSCO. Accessed December 15, 2025. <https://www.ebsco.com/research-starters/military-history-and-science/battle-plassey>.

weakened Nawab of Bengal, Sirāj al-Dawlā, they became the effective rulers of Bengal, the richest province of India, effectively destroying what was left of the once great Mughal wealth.⁷

Events like the takeover of Bengal led to the systematic and gradual drain of India's wealth. British colonization crushed Indian economics by circulating and overwhelming trade circuits with cheap, machine-made British products after the Industrial Revolution. The Indian economy was built on the traditional handicraft and textile industries, but with everything being made with British machines now, craftsmen and artisans were all jobless. While the British were overwhelming Indian Trade, the Mughal, the world's richest civilization, was exploited and impoverished through trade manipulation, improper land settlements, and taxation frameworks that fed Britain's industrial rise while draining India of its culture, wealth, and infrastructure.⁸ Between 1835 and 1872, India's exports exceeded its imports by over \$667 million.⁹ This trade network was made specifically so that money made through India would never reach the actual country. This economic oppression forced India to rely on Britain for everything, essentially solidifying Britain's iron grip control. In 1857, the first major independence rebellion occurred; it is also known as the First War of Independence. The rebellion began in Meerut, spreading to Delhi, Agra, Kanpur, and Lucknow, taking over a period of two years. It broke out in the Bengal army because it was the only place where Indians were organized, specifically in a militia.¹⁰ The incident of 1857 marked the end of the East India

⁷ Carey, William L. "Indian Timeline (1510-1947 A.D.)." Indian timeline (1510-1947 A.D.). Accessed December 15, 2025. <https://www.thelatinlibrary.com/imperialism/notes/indianchron.html>.

⁸ Sarvananda. "Economy in British Raj: The Systematic Drain of Indian Wealth." Genuine Hindu Info Source, October 12, 2025. <https://hinduinfopedia.org/economy-in-british-raj-the-systematic-drain-of-indian-wealth/>.

⁹ Sarvananda. "Economy in British Raj: The Systematic Drain of Indian Wealth." Genuine Hindu Info Source, October 12, 2025. <https://hinduinfopedia.org/economy-in-british-raj-the-systematic-drain-of-indian-wealth/>.

¹⁰ Admin. "Revolt of 1857 - First War of Independence against British." BYJUS, February 23, 2024. <https://byjus.com/free-ias-prep/revolt-of-1857/>.

Company's reign, with the "Indian Act" taking place. This governmental change began with direct British control over India, also known as the *British Raj*.

During the reign of the East India Company, India's once thriving textile industry essentially died, which pushed more and more laborers to work in agriculture. This large agricultural industry relied heavily on the monsoon season, and multiple times during the British Raj, those monsoons never came, causing major famine across the country.¹¹ These famines were not only caused by the drought, but also by laborers losing their livelihoods and ways of making money. "The Great Famine" occurred from 1876-1878 and affected economically disadvantaged countries worldwide, killing approximately 30-60 million people across the world.¹² Known as the "Madras Famine" in India, the Madras region in the south was especially hit hard, with an estimated 9.8 million people perishing. The staggering number of deaths means that approximately 4.5% of India's population, and 30% of the Madras population, perished in a two-year period.¹³ The British government did little to help the starving Indian population, and was hoarding stockpiles of grain to send shipments back to mainland Britain, all the while "their people" were struggling to stay alive. Local agriculture had been swept away by the government to pave the way for cash crops, essentially eliminating Indian livelihoods and food sources simultaneously.¹⁴ Land taxes had also become staggeringly expensive, leaving farmers to be beached in the middle of an impossible situation, and leaving

¹¹ Patel, Dinyar. "Viewpoint: How British Let One Million Indians Die in Famine." BBC News, June 10, 2016. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-36339524>.

¹² Fecht, Sarah. "What Caused the Great Famine?" State of the Planet, December 15, 2017. <https://news.climate.columbia.edu/2017/12/15/causes-great-famine-drought/>.

¹³ Carlton, Genevieve. "Inside the Horrific Madras Famine That Killed an Estimated 8 Million People in British India in Just Two Years." All That's Interesting, May 20, 2025. <https://allthatsinteresting.com/madras-famine>.

¹⁴ Carlton, Genevieve. "Inside the Horrific Madras Famine That Killed an Estimated 8 Million People in British India in Just Two Years." All That's Interesting, May 20, 2025. <https://allthatsinteresting.com/madras-famine>.

the people who relied on those farmers' food to be left starving.¹⁵ These heartbreaking facts are just more examples of Britain's quest for power and money, and how it has ruined entire populations.

The first step toward Indian independence came in 1885 with the formation of the Indian National Congress ("INC") which was made with the objective of providing a platform for Indians to share their views with the British government. The independence movement came in three phases, the Moderate Phase (1885-1905), the Extremist Phase (1905-1919), and the Gandhian Era (1919-1947).¹⁶ Each phase challenged the British government's control by Indian's organizing British goods boycotts and instead promoting Swadeshi (indigenous) goods, hosting extremist protests, and eventually partaking in non-violent protests led by Mahatma Gandhi. With the efforts of Indian's near and far, India officially gained independence from the British Empire on August 15, 1947 with the Indian Independence Act. After the initial independence act a large shift happened in the region and the land mass controlled by Britain was split into two countries, the Dominion of India and the Dominion of Pakistan. On January 26, 1950 India adopted its constitution and became the Republic of India. In 1956 Pakistan adopted the first of many constitutions, and in 1971 East Pakistan became Bangladesh.

In the 21st century India is the 7th largest country by land area in the world, is the most populous country in the world (since 2023), and is the world's most populous democracy. India has grown past many adversity's and challenges from its tumultuous past as Britain's cash cow, to become the world's fourth largest economy. Although it has a rapidly growing economy, India still suffers from effects of Britain's maltreatment of India's people, economy, and

¹⁵ Carlton, Genevieve. "Inside the Horrific Madras Famine That Killed an Estimated 8 Million People in British India in Just Two Years." All That's Interesting, May 20, 2025.
<https://allthatsinteresting.com/madras-famine>.

¹⁶ S, Arun. "1857 to 1947 History of India: Freedom Struggle Timeline." Xylem Learning, June 2, 2025.
<https://xylemlearning.com/1857-to-1947-history-of-india/>.

infrastructure. Currently, India has an increasingly worrying level of quality in public goods, like education, healthcare, and their judicial system.¹⁷ India also has an overpopulation problem, that has caused Dheli to top the list of most polluted cities for years, and the Ganges River (which is the “life giving river” to Hindu people) has caused many health concerns for people in Indian cities by the world’s top health institutions. All of these current issues India suffers from are an affect of Britian’s control over India. In short, India has suffered immensely from Britian’s economic manipulation, maltreatment, and ignorance that has caused the death and suffering of millions of Indian people for centuries. This prime example of the British Empire’s lasting affect on the countries it terrorised, puts into perspective the lasting impact of greed, and power on the world.

¹⁷ Adhia, Nimish. “The History of Economic Development in India since Independence - Association for Asian Studies.” Association for Asian Studies. Accessed December 21, 2025. <https://www.asianstudies.org/publications/ea/archives/the-history-of-economic-development-in-india-since-independence/>.

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<https://hinduinfopedia.org/economy-in-british-raj-the-systematic-drain-of-indian-wealth/>.