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# The British Empire

## Sunrise to Sunset

Philippa Levine



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tried to drive out the British in 1770, but though the British remained unsubdued, it was not a territory for which they were willing to fight. They withdrew their settlement in the late 1770s, though continuing to claim ownership. The Spaniards, who had taken control of the French settlements in 1767, withdrew in 1811 and little attention was paid to these remote islands until, in the early 1830s, newly independent Argentina claimed possession on the curious grounds that the Falklands had once been, like Argentina, part of the Spanish Empire. Britain promptly despatched a naval expedition to the South Atlantic and declared the Falkland Islands a Crown Colony in 1832.

Although friction with France dominated much of Britain's colonial doings in the early nineteenth as well as the eighteenth centuries, the British and the Spanish also clashed, as in the Falklands and in many of the complicated wars discussed in the previous two chapters. One other long-term bone of colonial contention between the two countries was Gibraltar, on the southernmost tip of Spain This promontory on the Iberian peninsula, just a few kilometres from the North African coast, was first claimed by the British in 1704. By the 1713 Treaty of Utrecht, resident Gibraltarians continued to enjoy rights that, had the territory been wholly British, would have been denied them as Catholics. Gibraltar proved useful for British naval forays in the Mediterranean where, as a result of the Napoleonic Wars, they added Malta and the Ionian Islands to their colonial spoils, extending the Empire quite significantly into European territory.

Such captures as these demonstrate just how much of Britain's imperial strength derived from naval prowess. The colonial acquisitions and consolidations we have tracked gave Britain an immense advantage, in effect a global chain of harbours, a powerful and dominant navy, and an empire that, by 1815, was the largest in the modern world. From a concentration for most of the eighteenth century on the Atlantic, and centred on the West Indies and America, the Empire had not only expanded considerably in the Pacific but had secured an impressive network of ports and harbours that gave Britain that imperial pre-eminence that would so colour its modern history.

CHAPTER 5

# Britain in India

In the colonial scheme of things, Britain's imperial interests in India were among its most important as early as the seventeenth century. It would, of course, be the middle of the nineteenth century before the British government laid formal claim to ruling large parts of India, but that did not mean that British India was not central to Britain's Empire at a far earlier date.

India was not a single country or entity, but rather a collection of states ruled in different ways, and frequently with markedly different languages and customs. There was no single Indian language or religion. Small and large areas were governed by local dynasties, and by the eighteenth century much of northern and central India was ruled by the powerful Moguls. British imperial influence in the subcontinent came on the heels of this empire. The last wave of Muslim Moguls had arrived in India from central Asia in the sixteenth century, cleverly forging alliances with powerful Hindu elites in India and rapidly establishing significant control. Mogul power and wealth was considerable and early British traders were obliged to pay homage to the Mogul rulers. In the seventeenth century European merchants typically traded in Asia by permission of local rulers whose power and military might were at least the equal of the Europeans.

The dominating British enterprise in India was the East India Company (EIC), launched in London in 1600 by a powerful financial elite. The EIC was a chartered company, enjoying a monopoly over British trade with the east. The chartered company was an economic and political device of mutual benefit to a company and its backers and to the government of the country in which the company was established. The position of such corporations changed over time, and by the eighteenth century, in return for a share of the profits (and sometimes also favourable loans), the government granted the companies tremendous political and military as well as economic freedom in a given area. The EIC enjoyed not only a trade monopoly but the government's agreement that it might directly negotiate with local rulers, and might engage in warfare to defend company privileges (though it was forbidden to initiate hostilities). It also enjoyed the right to control British citizens within company territory. As a joint-stock enterprise, the EIC was well suited to expensive long-distance trade, for its size meant it could raise more money and spread the risk involved over a larger group of investors, a strategy unavailable to small traders. These monopolistic policies, part of the mercantile system, were typical of the way in which global business was conducted before the free trade era of the nineteenth century. Clearly, such policies married economics and governance in important ways, since much more than control over commerce was granted to those doing business around the globe.

India was of growing importance among Britain's colonies even beyond its commercial capacity. The EIC's hold on India was tightening at much the same time that the American colonies broke away from Britain. The loss of America was as much a psychological as an economic blow. The failure of British trade in the East Indies (Indonesia and the Spice Islands) and the barriers to trade in China before the 1840s made India a particularly important site of British interest, their principal foothold in Asia. Success in India acted as a counterbalance to Britain's inability to rein in the American revolt. India became more and more important not only for its products but increasingly as a symbol of Britain's overseas power after the loss of America. India would occupy British attention until the middle of the twentieth century, strongly influencing other colonial decisions and acting as a training ground for scores of colonial officials.

The need to protect India from the encroachment of rival powers often shaped colonial policy in the nineteenth century, just as in the eighteenth century protection of the sugar colonies had been paramount. Fear of neighbouring Burma led to the first of the Anglo-Burmese wars in the mid-1820s, prompted by Burmese expansion into Indian territories. Friction with the Burmese kingdom of Ava would lead eventually in 1886 to Britain's annexation of parts of Burma, taken under the wing of Indian administration. Rivalry with European powers also prompted land-grabbing. As we have already noted, Britain seized the island of Mauritius in the Indian Ocean from the French, and Java from the Dutch, in 1810. Close to India, in Ceylon the British poached on territories formerly under the control of Portuguese and Dutch interests, annexing the island in 1796. To the east the British commandeered interests (including Singapore on the Malay peninsula) that, in their earliest colonial days, were administered, like Ceylon, through the East India Company. The Malay colonies were used early on by the company, in an echo of Australian transportation, as a dumping ground for Indian convicts used as forced labour. There were also a whole series of strategically placed sites en route to India and seized by the British during the French war, including the Seychelles (1794), the Cape of Good Hope (1795) and Malta (1800; annexed 1814). The Andaman Islands in the Indian Ocean were first colonized as a convict colony in 1789, but the settlement lasted only until 1796. It would be populated again as a convict colony for British India in 1858.

To the east, China was closely connected to British interests in India, for a significant fraction of the East India Company's profits derived from the sale in China of opium grown in India. The efforts of the Chinese leadership to stem the flow of Indian opium would lead in 1839 and again in 1856 to war and to Britain's acquisition in 1841 of the island of Hong Kong, just off the southern coast of mainland China. In 1839 Britain also took possession of Aden, its proximity to the Red Sea and the Arabian Sea making it a vital coaling station for ships en route to India. It was governed from Bombay for almost a hundred years.

With these new, and sometimes temporarily held, colonial possessions, Britain formed a circle of protection around India, near and far, and in essence the East India Company became a transnational corporation with tentacles all over the world, holding together both its fiscal and its political interests. These close ties – political, military, geographical, economic – exemplify the interconnection of imperial interest and expansion, each colony influencing and shaping other British possessions. A mass of factors was always involved in the acquisition and the maintaining of colonies; it was never a single factor that decided which areas of the world would come under British rule. And as the Empire grew in size, these more global considerations became more and more important. India – and, before 1857, the EIC – was frequently central to these considerations.

Yet in the late 1680s the company's future in India had been uncertain. The sum of £15,000 in compensation for defensive military actions paid to the Emperor Aurangzeb helped ensure that the EIC did not lose its trading rights, but what this failed military aggression clearly demonstrates is that the company, even before the dawn of the eighteenth century, no longer felt constrained to engage only in peaceful trade. That important shift in policy would have far-reaching consequences. By 1700 the company had established the three presidencies of Bombay (to the west), Madras (in the south) and Bengal (to the east). Though they were small in area, the company had also, by this time, leased more than 20 trading posts from the Moguls. In return for these, the rulers of India expected aid in stemming piracy and, perhaps most importantly, in organizing the collecting of land revenues. The East India Company's role in collecting taxes from property (especially in Bengal) was increasingly important. Its part in the administration of the system brought huge wealth both to the company and to individual officials. Over time, and despite its origins as a trading entity, the EIC's focus shifted from trade to taxation.

Company trade was regulated by a *firman* from the emperor, which granted the company trading rights in designated areas in return for either rent or an annual fee. In its early years, company jurisdiction was only over very small areas of India, a situation that would change with astonishing rapidity after the 1750s. The Mogul Empire was changing direction, moving from a heavily centralized power to a more regional and decentralized entity. Europeans read this change as indicating the empire's decline, and these changes did render the Moguls vulnerable to attack and invasion, as well as to the intrigues of other Indian rulers (of whom there were many) anxious to enjoy a share of India's lucrative trade. The company, too, had been transformed early in the eighteenth century. After far-reaching criticism of its methods and practices, it had re-formed in 1709 as the United Company of Merchants Trading to the East Indies. It was a change by which the company became, in many respects, a national institution, and a highly profitable one. Between 1709 and 1748 there were only two occasions on which the company was unable to pay dividends to its shareholders. At the start of the eighteenth century, the EIC's trade was focused heavily on India, from where some 90 per cent of its major cargoes originated. Textiles were among the most profitable of its goods. In Sumatra the company also traded in pepper and in China in tea, silk and chinaware.

It was when the East India Company defeated Mogul forces in 1757 that the expansion of British India really began in earnest. The company had explicitly violated its agreement with the Moguls by fortifying Calcutta (the centre of British Bengali operations) against the French. They also engaged in a host of illegal and dubious commercial practices in the region. Angered, the nawab of Bengal, Siraj-ud-Daula, reacted by capturing Calcutta in June 1756. His imprisonment of Europeans in what became notorious as the 'Black Hole' of Calcutta – and the death of some of the prisoners – ignited British anger. The quick and decisive defeat of the nawab's forces by company troops led by Colonel Robert Clive at the Battle of Plassey resulted in a change in leadership. The new nawab, Mir Jafar, was very much under the British thumb, at least early in his rule. Bengal, and especially Calcutta, became the central power base of the company over the course of the century. The growing importance of Bengal in trading also helped enhance its supremacy.

From the 1760s, as more territory and power accrued, the presidencies took on responsibilities traditionally the province of governments rather than commercial companies. With their courts of law and their armies, the three presidencies effectively ruled larger and larger tracts of the subcontinent, deploying their armies against intractable rulers as much as against the French whose interest in the region had not waned and who hoped to weaken the British through supporting local rebellions. The decisive defeat of the French interest came in the early 1760s, when victory in a series of skirmishes in south-east India consolidated Britain's position. The company took advantage of the ousting of the French from India and the failing power of the increasingly fragmented Mogul Empire. British patronage of regional rulers speeded the disintegration of the older Mogul

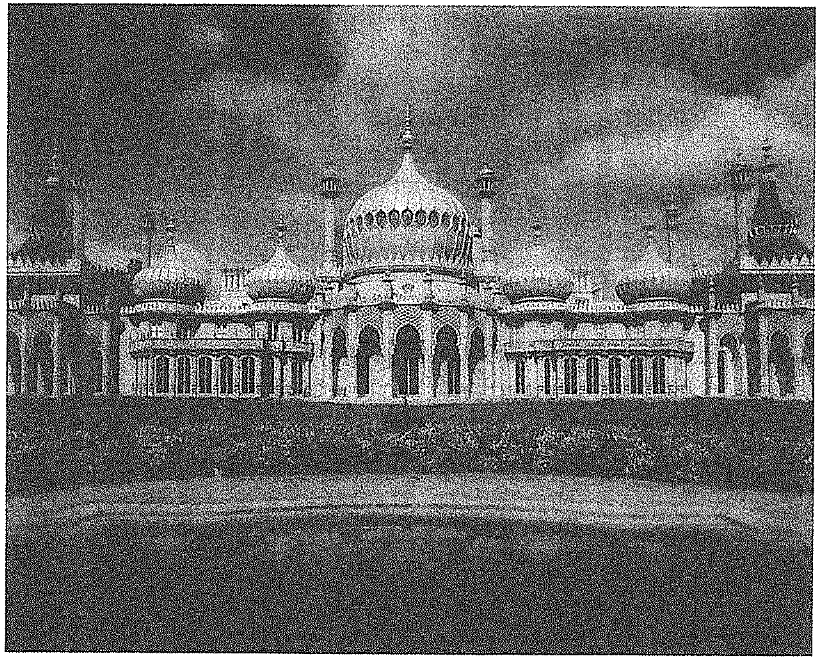


**FIGURE 5** *Brighton Pavilion: built in 1784 and purchased in the early nineteenth century by the Prince Regent. John Nash oversaw the rebuilding of the palace between 1815 and 1821 in a mixture of classical and Indian styles, often labelled 'Hindoo-Gothic'* (Alamy/Chris Ballentine)

power structure while stabilizing and entrenching a British foothold. Coupled with Britain's willingness to colonize, if sometimes only temporarily, in regions helpful to Indian expansion, such as Mauritius and Java, these tactics secured the company's extraordinary transformation. Moreover, the fact that it still continued to pay fat dividends to its British shareholders gave the company considerable weight in Britain.

Yet there was both serious internal dissension and concern in government circles about the conduct of individual officials and about the company's arrogation of power. EIC officials came to be seen as greedy, unscrupulous and self-seeking, and those who ostensibly controlled direction and policy from London felt increasingly in the late eighteenth century as if they could not control their own employees. Novelists poked fun at the 'nabobs' and they were often resented and despised in Britain, seen as a corrupt and spoiled nouveau riche. The most famous of the nabobs was Robert Clive who won battles, commercial concessions and territory for the company. Always a controversial figure, Clive did much in the 1760s to steer the company towards its new role in India, though at times he was more popular with the public than with his employers. His most celebrated accomplishment apart from the victory at Plassey in 1757 was engineering the *diwani* (revenue control) of Bengal in 1765. By this agreement (also known as the Treaty of Allahabad), the company won the sole right to collect revenues on behalf of the emperor, now Shah Alam, in Bengal and in neighbouring Bihar and Orissa. In return the emperor was to be paid the enormous sum of 2.6 million rupees a year. At the same time, Clive enriched his own coffers considerably, returning to Britain immeasurably wealthier.

This intensification of the company's financial role not only altered its own profile but had a lasting impact on patterns of landownership in eastern India. The 'Permanent Settlement' engineered by Lord Cornwallis in 1793 created a new landowning class of local wealthy Indians who had functioned previously as tax collectors. Tax assessments on land remained unchanged over time, offering an incentive for a new and profitable form of property-holding by purchase. The effect was to alter the basis of property ownership substantially, investing individuals with rights of ownership previously shared among all those with an interest in the cultivation of land. Whereas the system significantly enriched the affluent tax-collecting *zamindari* or *talukadar* and, of course, the company, ordinary farmers and agricultural labourers were forced to pay substantial land taxes. Since these remained unchanged whatever the yield of the harvest, they paid heavily under the new system for their traditional livelihood. It was – for the wealthy, at least – a profitable system that put India at the centre of British imperial interests.

For all the wealth this created, and despite Clive's considerable political skills, the company ran aground in the late 1760s. Political intrigue, charges of corruption, expensive military campaigns and a market crash that seriously threatened EIC stock pushed the British government into action. It was abundantly clear by the 1770s that the government needed to regulate the affairs of the company if Britain's national interests in India were to remain viable. India was too profitable and prestigious a possession by then to risk losing, and in 1773 the prime minister, Lord North, changed the course of British colonialism in India. His Regulating Act, though cautious and exploratory, established the government's authority over the company's activities in India. The Act created the position of governor general to oversee all three presidencies. The court of directors made the nomination, but could appoint to the position only with government approval. A new supreme court at Calcutta in Bengal, which replaced Delhi as the centre of power in India, had judges appointed from London. The system created considerable resentment in the presidencies, angered by their loss of autonomy, as well as among the company's directors in London who resented the government's interference.

This tension between officials on the ground and government in London would become an enduring hallmark of British imperialism. It had, in some senses, already been apparent in the American context, for it was opposition to what American colonists regarded as undue control from London that catalysed rebellion. The principle of government intervention was the chief cause of friction. Warren Hastings, the first governor general in India from 1774 to 1785, endured almost constant disharmony in relations between London and the colonial government. Despite long experience in the company's service in India he faced opposition on a number of fronts and, with his uncompromising views on what forms imperial Indian governance should take, he was always a controversial figure. India in these years received a tremendous amount of attention in the London press, and debates about the moral status both of British and company involvement were vigorous.

It was in part because of some of the stalemates Hastings had faced in his years in office that Pitt's government reconsidered the 1773 Act under which Hastings was appointed. That Act was replaced by a more comprehensive law after eleven years, and after the fall of the British government at the end of 1783 over its policy on India. By then, the American rebels had changed the face of British imperialism, making India even more important and more attractive a possession, and tilting the axis of British imperial expansion towards Asia; and of course, unlike the 13 colonies, there was no settler tradition or elective government in India to challenge the new structures. In many respects, the India Act of 1784 extended and expanded upon the earlier Act, strengthening both the power of the governor general and of the profitable Bengal presidency over Madras and Bombay. The governor general acquired the power of veto over his council and over the decisions of the two other presidencies. His appointment remained officially in company hands, but since the government had the power of recall the procedure became one of careful negotiation between government and the EIC; after Hastings, those appointed to the position were routinely outsiders to the company. The governorship became a politically motivated appointment. The Act also created a Board of Control based in Britain. The company did not lose its trade monopoly, its role in revenue collection, or its right to appoint and dismiss its own officials, but the board now gained jurisdiction over the company's civil, military and revenue affairs in India. The law gave Britain's politicians new power to control the political and diplomatic roles of the company. Although the total shift from control by a chartered corporation to direct government rule did not take place until 1858, a heightened degree of government supervision and interest was already changing how large parts of India were ruled and by whom.

For all the expansion of power, however, the East India Company found its prominent new role in British India a costly one, and its growing control of India was accompanied by an anxiety over balancing the books and realizing the necessary profits. The heavy cost of the machinery of government as well as of maintaining standing armies, as the company did in all three presidencies, cut into profits considerably, thus prompting the government, always concerned with the profitability of trade, to intervene in company affairs. Governor General Cornwallis had begun the task of professionalizing the company's growing administrative staff, creating competitive pay scales and a merit-centred ethos long before the British civil service adopted such practices. It was a policy prompted in large measure by the perpetual outcry in Britain over the corrupt practices of company servants. After 1805, company civil servants were sent to the EIC's own college in Britain, Haileybury, where they underwent a two-year preparatory training before being posted to India. Along with Calcutta's College of Fort William (founded in 1802) where new recruits received language training, Haileybury gave the Indian civil service a unique level of preparation among government servants.



Each presidency also supported its own army, composed largely of Indian soldiers (sepoys) commanded by a white officer class. In the second half of the eighteenth century their numbers swelled strikingly. There were some 18,000 troops in the three presidencies in 1763; 40 years later there were over 150,000. In Bengal alone, the 1756 contingent of 3,000 soldiers rose in a mere decade to 26,000. The soldiers were needed to keep order at a time of increasing restiveness among local rulers and to ward off threats, especially from the French, in the late 1790s. Yet the expansion of territory effected by this soldiery was also the source of their financing; without the revenue brought in by what the military achieved, there could be no expansion in their number. The military component of the company was a self-propelling entity necessary for rule but also itself creating the need for the relentless expansion of territory and therefore revenue so characteristic of the later eighteenth century. The high expense of the military continued into the new century, directly influencing the course of economic policy.

In the years after 1858 the composition of the army in India would change radically, but in the years of company rule the presidency armies were overwhelmingly Indian. Poor men were recruited into the armies by the promise of regular pay and food and a pension. At a time when the British army was regarded contemptuously as a haven for those who needed to hide, the armies of the company were well-trained and well-disciplined forces. Indians employed in the civil administration, equally, were well educated, though in the 1830s there was considerable debate over the wisdom of encouraging an English-style education among Indian elites. Much of urban India (in cities such as Lucknow and Calcutta) possessed an active elite culture in the early nineteenth century with a lively literary and theatrical scene and a well-established musical and dance tradition. British interests lay with whether or not an English education would secure the long-term loyalty of this essential class of administrators. They were essential not only because, like all colonial ventures, success relied in part on a degree of collaboration and collusion, but also because there were insufficient numbers of Britons to keep the enterprise afloat. Without the work of Indians – whether in clerical and administrative positions, in farm labour or building construction, or in the armed forces – British India simply could not have functioned.

The number of Britons residing in India remained small until after direct rule was imposed in 1858; in the 1830s, the British component of the population was 45,000 out of a total population of 150 million. Even after 1858, the numbers were never vast, though there were significant changes in who came to India over the course of the nineteenth century. In the earliest years of British influence, aside from the occasional adventurer, the majority of Britons in India were company officials working either in trade or in the military. As the company became a political body, traders gave way to emissaries and administrators. The numbers still remained small, and this population was almost exclusively male, for there were no job opportunities for British women; the company rarely permitted officials to bring their wives with them to India, and the military allowed marriage for only a small percentage of the rank and file. The trickle of British women going to India grew in the nineteenth century, as first missionaries and then other women began to settle. However, the majority of women in India throughout the British period were the wives of officials, civil and military. As a result, areas of British settlement and residence in Indian towns and cities were slowly transformed into family-oriented areas resembling more and more the environment left behind in Britain.

The indigenous population, meanwhile, became increasingly mobile. Changes in land use and in patterns of landownership under both Mogul and British rule disrupted traditional occupations, and shortages and famines – never unknown in the region – became more frequent and more severe. The Bengal famine of 1770, caused by a mix of high taxation and a drought, killed a third of the local population. Many sought new job opportunities catering to British needs as traditional employments diminished. From the 1830s many Indians signed on as indentured labourers, either on the tea plantations in Assam in eastern India and nearby Ceylon or on the rice plantations in British Burma, or in more distant lands. The abolition of slavery in 1833 created a need for a new workforce in traditional areas of slave agriculture. The early abandonment of apprenticeship schemes for former slaves in 1838 quickened the pace of recruitment. India's large rural population seemed an obvious source for plantation labour and recruiters targeted areas where work was scarce. The pre-colonial existence of debt bondage in India – where debts were paid off through labour, not necessarily that of the debtor, and often in fact of a younger family member – perhaps made the prospect of indenture less alarming, and certainly the severe depression of the late 1820s to 1850s spurred the supply of such workers.

A very different set of political influences, meanwhile, were at work in Britain. The influence of the free trade movement, hostile to the protectionism and monopoly that had so characterized the eighteenth-century mercantile system, was increasingly strong in Britain, and when the EIC's



charter came up for renewal by parliament in 1813, the free trade lobby was ready. The company lost most of its monopoly in India, retaining it only on opium and salt. Since together these items represented 25 per cent of the company's income, and since trade played less and less prominent a part in the company's operations, the loss was in some ways symbolic, more a reflection of political than economic concerns. Though the company experienced some diminution in its commercial ventures, its power in the three presidencies was more and more comprehensive, and its military was untouched by the changes to the charter. The charter renewal did introduce, however, a small contingent (40,000 maximum) of royal forces to India, supplementing the growing size of the EIC armies. Twenty years later, in the 1833 charter renewal, the victory of the free traders was complete: the company lost its last remaining monopoly in China, and India was opened fully to private traders.

The activities of the EIC over the course of the first half of the nineteenth century make it hard to remember that this was a trading and commercial organization. Philip Lawson describes the company after 1813 as 'a department of state'.[1] From the 1820s on, and acting exactly like a government, Indian administrations tackled a host of social improvement issues in India, moving away from the earlier principles of 'orientalism' that had avoided overt influence on local cultures. This new direction in policy was typified by Thomas Babington Macaulay, a member of the Bengal Supreme Council, and by William Bentinck, governor general from 1828 to 1835. Macaulay, in a famous tract known as his 'minute on education' (1835) argued that English should be the language of state in India, and that westernization would improve the condition of India and guarantee the loyalties of India's educated classes. Bentinck, meanwhile, presided over a series of social reforms in the 1830s that attacked what were regarded as barbarous local customs.

In the same year that Bentinck was appointed governor general, Calcutta-based activist and prolific author Ram Mohan Roy founded a reform organization, the Brahmo Samaj, that would be of tremendous influence in eastern India. A Hindu-based organization dedicated to extirpating idol worship and the caste system, the Brahmo Samaj was also active in social reform. Many of the same issues on the organization's agenda also caught Bentinck's attention, prominent among them the ancient practice of widow sacrifice (suttee), in which a widow threw herself upon her husband's burning funeral pyre, dying in recognition of his centrality to her existence. An EIC regulation of 1813 had declared suttee legal as long as it was a voluntary act. Roy, arguing that the practice was not necessary to religious observance, published in both Bengali and English a tract condemning the practice in 1818. Journalistic and literary accounts of women's hideous screams of agony captured the British imagination, while for Roy and his followers the practice was a brutal corruption of Hindu tenets. In 1829 Bentinck outlawed it, though this did little to extirpate the practice. In remote areas few would have known of the change in the law, and in any case the incidence of suttee seems to have been regionally specific and confined to the higher castes. Some historians have argued that the law was counterproductive, advertising the practice more widely, and also making it seem an act subversive of British rule.

The ban on suttee was only one of a number of reforms undertaken in the years of EIC governance and aimed at Indian women. In 1856, a Widow Remarriage Act permitted Hindu widows to remarry, but forced them to forfeit rights in their deceased husband's estate. This was also an issue that Indian reformers, led by Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, had campaigned about for decades. But the form the law took robbed low-caste women of economic opportunities, since the prohibition on remarriage had generally been practised only among the higher castes. Ordinary women had always remarried, but under the new law could no longer inherit from their husbands when they did so.

Widow remarriage and suttee reform alike failed to take into account the differences between practice in elite and in poor families. In assuming that high-caste Brahmin orthodoxy was widespread, reforms of this sort often made the lives of lower-caste and poorer women more difficult. As Barbara Ramusack has noted, neither British nor Indian reformers saw any need for the counsel of Indian women in formulating their actions.[2] All these laws presumed the lesser status of women in Indian culture and society and emphasized a highly elitist interpretation of Hinduism based solely on Brahmin texts. This thinking became the basis for much of the colonial accommodation to local custom in the nineteenth century, a policy that reinvested the Hindu caste system with power and gave the men of the priestly Brahmin caste a disproportionate influence in discussions of what constituted proper Hinduism and proper Indian behaviour. It was a colonial tendency that would recur in other parts of the Empire with equally detrimental and divisive results. It reflected, too, a conscious power shift on the part of the British, favouring Hindu over Muslim.

Measures of reform almost always involved a critique of what were seen as typically Indian behaviours or ideas, and implemented conduct and values favoured by British elite culture. With each successive diminution in company power at the time of charter renewal, the metropolitan voices of reform – spearheaded by free traders and evangelicals – became more influential. Bolstered by Indian activism in many of the same areas of concern, early nineteenth-century governments intervened ever more closely in Indian religion, culture and social life. The effect was often to emphasize the more conservative strands of local society. The Hindu caste system, now enforced through the courts, became, if anything, more pervasive and more stultifying, and Britain's interest in maintaining Indian princes as local rulers helped to keep tradition securely in place. British economic policy discouraged competition with the metropole, making large parts of India more rural and agrarian just as Europe was industrializing.

These reforms point to the declining role of the EIC and the rising government interest in India – many of these reforms would probably not have been initiated by the EIC alone. The company's long-standing policy on religion had been one of toleration and non-intervention. Christian missionaries were long forbidden to work in India, and it was only in 1813 that the evangelical lobby was able to overcome the EIC's mistrust of missionary activity. Even then their victory was only partial. Missionaries required licences in areas under company control and were watched carefully. It would be another 20 years before missionaries gained complete freedom of mobility and organization in India.

For all the interest in the alleged social ills of the country, there was one critical arena that remained untouched, and that was the opium trade between India (the source of production) and China (the point of sale). The dulling and addictive effects of opiates were already known in Britain, and in the popular imagination opium was associated with the 'Chinaman'. Throughout the nineteenth century, a city's Chinatown (whether in Britain, Australia, Hong Kong or Canada) was invariably depicted as a place teeming with haze-filled opium dens where insensate addicts dozed and dreamed. Yet the trade – unwelcome to the Chinese authorities – was hugely lucrative for the EIC and for the Chinese middlemen to whom they sold the drug. The Chinese government's hostility to the importation of opium to China did not deter Indian production, although it did force the company to find ways around Chinese anti-opium laws. In effect, the company endorsed a huge and sophisticated smuggling ring. In terms of income, it was worth the risk. Without opium there would be a trade deficit on the Chinese trading route. China had little interest in the other goods available from British traders; its own pottery and textiles were far superior, and it had tea in abundance. If the Chinese did not buy the company's opium there was little else to sell them, and tea bought from China had to be paid for in cash since the Chinese were uninterested in the other goods on offer. The only way to address the deficits that this large outlay of cash entailed was from the sale of opium.

Although illegal in China, the opium trade was enormously profitable and constantly growing, with the result that opium became one of the most important products managed and traded by the East India Company. Large numbers of workers in India relied on the income from growing poppies, and the company offered incentives to farmers involved in its production. The company thus invested considerable time and effort in developing this trade. Before the large-scale cultivation of opium poppies in India, Turkey had been the world's principal source of opium. The disintegration of the Ottoman Empire during the nineteenth century made the development of Indian cultivation a viable business proposition, so much so that in 1830 the British government gave permission for more extensive opium cultivation in India. The effect, not surprisingly, was to reduce cultivation of other agricultural products in the race for the easy profits associated with the opium poppy.

The company's monopoly on opium had been the work of Warren Hastings, first governor general of India. Over time, the monopoly tightened; by 1793, poppy growers in India could sell only to the EIC. Despite its central role in the movement of opium from India to China, the company worked hard to disguise its position in the trade. It sold the opium at auction in Calcutta, from where it was shipped by private firms rather than in company vessels to China and distributed by smugglers. The proceeds from the sales, however, were always paid to the EIC's own China office.

A clash between China's Manchu leaders and British traders over the illegal importation into China of huge quantities of the drug was inevitable. China was concerned both about high levels of opium addiction among its populace and about the drain on the country's stocks of silver, which were being diverted to pay for opium. The first of the two Opium Wars broke out when Chinese customs officials impounded opium shipments arriving at Canton (now Guangzhou). Britain, already irritated by a Chinese offensive to curb the trade, deployed a naval detachment to shell important Chinese ports and trading sites in protest, and was successful not only in forcing trade concessions from the Chinese, but also in acquiring the new colony of Hong Kong. This three-year war, from 1839 to 1842, occurred at much the same time as social reformers were declaring the moral bankruptcy of Indian society. Yet other than the evangelical



lobby, surprisingly few British voices were raised in protest over the selling of opium until late in the nineteenth century. The war was depicted in the British press and in parliament as a principled dispute over free trade rather than about drug peddling. Both government and the EIC focused attention on China's refusal to allow foreign merchants commercial access to the country. The continued monopoly the company enjoyed in trading opium was conveniently forgotten, as was the fact that its sale violated Chinese law. In practice, the war – conducted not by the company but by the British government – was a convenient way to force open the China trade that had for so long eluded the British. In his 1845 novel *Sybil*, future Conservative prime minister Benjamin Disraeli satirized the most famous of the opium merchants, William Jardine, as the fictional 'McDruggy fresh from Canton, with a million in opium in each pocket, denouncing corruption and bellowing free trade'.[3]

The 1842 Treaty of Nanking made no mention of opium despite the fact that it had been the catalyst for the 1839 war. By 1849, the trade through Hong Kong was worth about £6 million a year. Opium continued to be a valued commodity throughout the nineteenth century, and was the second largest source of revenue for India after land taxes. Sales and trading were as brisk in the 1890s as they had been early in the century. The trade also remained the province of highly respectable business ventures. After the loss of the EIC monopoly in 1833, other companies could profit from the trade and some of the most prominent of Hong Kong's commercial entities owed their success to their entry into the opium trade. After the Second Opium War (1856–60), the trade was effectively legalized by the establishment of formal tariffs for the importing of opium.

Opium's huge profitability has always been more important to those who trade in it than have been the consequences of addiction to it. What makes the colonial opium trade so interesting is that it was controlled not by underground and illegal organizations but by some of the largest and most successful businesses of the period, and with the direct knowledge of successive British governments. Moreover, in the case of the EIC, it was a business enterprise involved simultaneously, via its political wing, in the implementation of law and order in British India. In effect, then, the nineteenth century opium trade was more than connived at by government: it was actively encouraged. Furthermore, that encouragement did not deter officials from claiming moral, religious and civilizational superiority over both those who grew the product and those to whom they trafficked it. Few outside the highly moralistic circles of evangelism saw the contradictions at work in an arena where politics, economics, religion and culture so fully coalesced. Ironically, the Treaty of Tientsin in 1858, which put opium trading on a legal footing, also saw the opening of China to Christian missionaries for the first time! The age of reform and of high morals was also quite palpably an age of rapacity.

The first half of the nineteenth century was a time of considerable expansion in British India. Annexation and a series of military skirmishes all required considerable military force, and the military in India was the largest in Asia, with 16 European regiments and 170 sepoy regiments. In the first quarter of the nineteenth century the Indian army was involved in a series of colonial wars that augmented Britain's territory in the region substantially. Britain annexed the Carnatic in 1801, Sind in 1843, the Punjab in 1849 and Oudh in 1856.

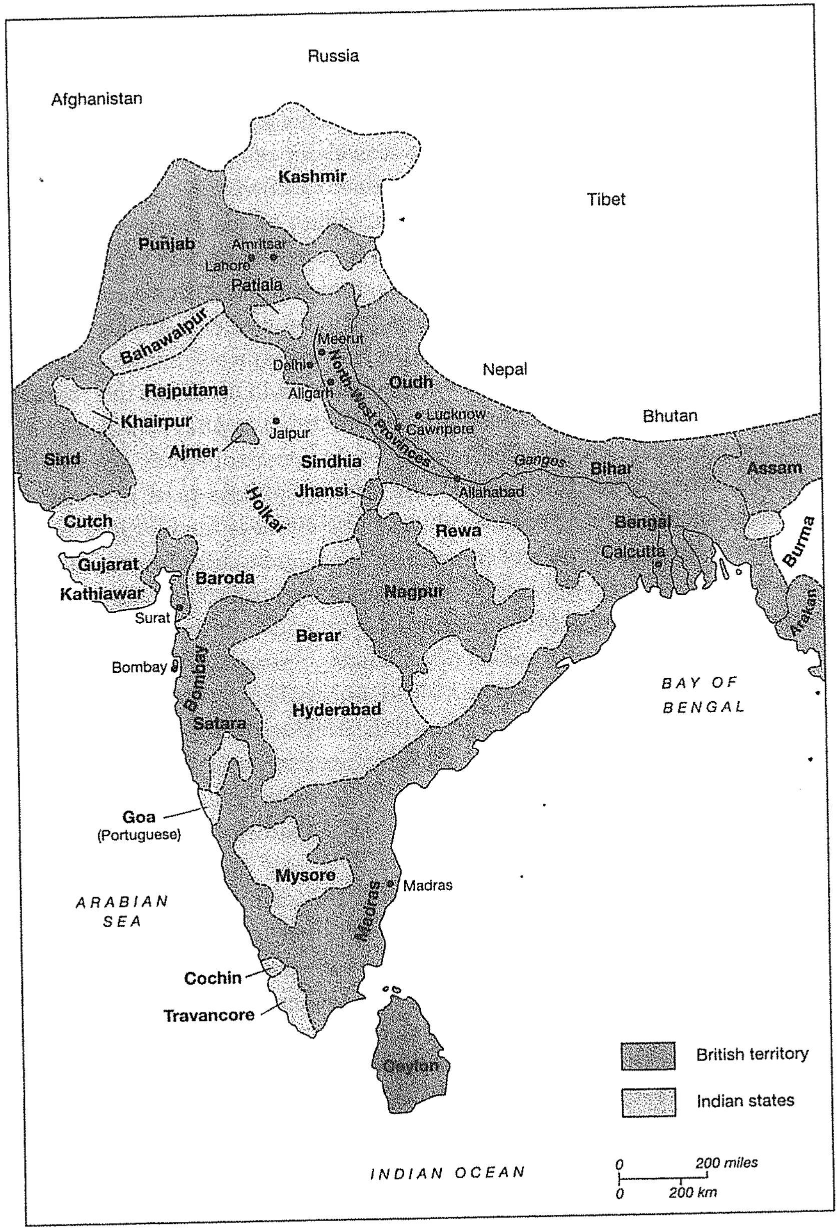
The EIC was increasingly acting like a government, imposing British values and British definitions, while incorporating more and more territory. From the mid-1840s, under the leadership of Lord Dalhousie, the tentacles of westernization spread further and further. Dalhousie eased the way for the construction of railways, steam-shipping and irrigation schemes. He laid plans for Indian universities and introduced changes in the military, and in 1854 set up a postal service. He altered the systems of land tenure that held back cultivation. He also ushered in the deeply unpopular 'doctrine of lapse', which broadened British opportunities for expansion by requiring that Indian states without a male heir were forfeited to the British. However, in the process of these many reforms, he angered many entrenched interests.

Local dissatisfaction with this system of dual government found many outlets. The company had won the right in 1813 to introduce a non-fixed tax system (*ryotwari*) in newly acquired territories. Peasant cultivators in these areas found themselves heavily taxed to compensate for the situation in Bengal where, under the Permanent Settlement, taxes could not be raised. Intervention in a few social issues by no means signalled an intent to overhaul and certainly not to modernize India. Local rebellions and resistance to company rule were not uncommon, and there was a general feeling that the British imposed alien values on local peoples. In the company armies there was resentment at British insensitivity: for example, a new army regulation in 1856 required service wherever posted, potentially jeopardizing the caste standing of Hindu sepoys, since crossing the 'black waters' (meaning going overseas) involved a loss of caste for high-caste Hindus. Yet during the latter half of the nineteenth century, the army required such service of Indian soldiers in large numbers. They were deployed in many colonial hot spots: in Ethiopia in 1867, in Egypt in 1882, in Burma in 1885, and in many parts of Africa in the 1890s and beyond, including in the Boer War.



The army was often a restive institution, and it was a military rebellion that prompted the end of dual government in India. The fuse that lit the 1857 rebellion among Indian soldiers was about religious taboo. Though it was only a catalyst for a range of differences between the sepoys and their command, the rumour that the cartridges of the new-issue Enfield rifles were greased with animal fat found fertile ground. The very breadth of the rumour – that the fat was both beef and pork, and thus anathema to Hindu and Muslim alike – itself suggests a profound degree of unhappiness, as does the long history of prior if less widespread mutinies among Indian soldiers. Earlier mutinies – at Barrackpur in 1824, in the North-west Frontier Provinces in 1844 and in the Punjab in 1849, to name just a few – had been stopped before they could spread. In 1857, however, tensions between the British and their Indian subjects (and not just in the army) had mounted considerably and resentment at the EIC's often high-handed methods of governance was common. Moreover, soldiers understood only too well that Dalhousie's army reforms imperilled their long-standing privileges. What began as a military mutiny in the Bengal Army spread beyond the soldiery to include agrarian protest and much more, though it remained focused in the north. The 1857 revolt was far more than merely a soldiers' protest. It expressed in many ways the burgeoning gulf between British authority and Indian subject. This revolt covered a whole range of frustrations – over extortionate tax demands, extensive overt racism, insensitivity to local culture and religion, and incessant territorial expansion.

The rebellion, which began in May 1857 at Meerut, spread rapidly and caught the British by surprise. It was more than a year before the uprising was fully contained, and in the meantime the destruction of life and property was abundant. Violence was met with violence. The British exacted brutal punishment for the revolt, in a reaction to some of the more violent episodes of the rebellion. Many Britons were murdered, and it was the slaying of British women and children that most angered the British, both in India and in Britain. Accounts of the rebellion often focused on this, an emphasis that made the Indians seem cowardly, cruel and unchivalrous. Such a focus also allowed British opinion to minimize other elements of the rebellion. Civilian and in some areas even landlord support for the mutiny was, in many regions, quite strong and often explicit in demanding the reinstatement of pre-British ruling dynasties, most particularly the Moguls and the western Indian Marathas, only recently subdued by the




**MAP 2** *India in 1857* (from Simon Smith, *British Imperialism 1750–1970*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), p. 52. © Cambridge University Press, reproduced with permission of the author and publisher.)



**FIGURE 6** *Mutiny tents, Indian soldiers, 1857* (Getty Research Institute/ Los Angeles, California (96.R.84))

British. The political elements of rebellion were played down while violence against unarmed British citizens was accentuated.

In any event, not only were the British anything but gracious in victory but the result of the mutiny was to oust the EIC and to impose direct British rule in its place, through the Government of India Act, passed in August 1858. The EIC was dissolved and a new Indian civil service established, with appointment by competitive examination. Officials reported directly to the British government via a newly created department in London, the India Office. India, unlike any other colony, now had its own separate government department. The governor general, also called the viceroy to demonstrate that he was the formal representative of the Crown, reported directly to the Secretary of State for India. The separate presidency governments were retained and were still subordinate to the governor general.

The dissolution of the EIC did not, of course, bring all of India under British control. Several hundred independent territories dotted the subcontinent, and in these the principle of paramountcy governed relations after 1858. Queen Victoria's proclamation of 1858 guaranteed the princes in these independent states their territory in exchange for a pledge of loyalty to the British Crown. The British retained the right, however, to intervene where a ruler colluded with an enemy of the Crown or in cases of 'gross misrule'. In reality, as had been the case under EIC governance, many of these princely states were independent in name only, and were subjugated to British interests and needs. As the nationalist movement took hold in parts of India from the 1880s onwards, many saw these hereditary princely states as anachronistic remnants of an earlier era deliberately kept alive by the British for their own political ends. It would be 1971 before India would fully abolish the principle of rule by inheritance in these states. By then, the full complement of the problems associated with it were apparent. The continued impasse over Kashmir so well known today can be traced in part to this policy; it was one of a handful of princely states unwilling in 1947 to accede to one or other of the newly created nations of India and Pakistan. Today both of these countries lay claim to Kashmir.

In practice, in many parts of India as much stayed the same after 1858 as changed. Officials often stayed on in the same positions. Lord Canning remained in office as governor general, despite the debacle of 1857. Instead of being employed by the company, officials and soldiers now became Crown employees. The new Council of India, advisory to the Secretary of State and replacing the old Board of Control, was at least partially in the hands of company men for some time. Their experience and knowledge was invaluable, but their loyalties were sometimes to an older tradition of rule.

For the Indian population, the most obvious difference may well have been the increase in the number of British soldiers they saw in their lands. Shaken by what was read as the disloyalty of Indian soldiers to the military establishment, the new system, still reliant on military muscle, doubled the number of British soldiers in India. After the Mutiny, there were never less than 60,000 British soldiers stationed in India. Cantonments grew to accommodate their numbers and the military lobby demanded ever fatter budgets. Sepoy numbers, though reduced, continued to outstrip those of white soldiers, but the palpably larger presence of British soldiers was seen as a deterrent to further trouble. Changes to local recruiting practice were made, with preference being given to illiterate and ill-educated men who were seen as likelier to accept an unquestioning oath of loyalty and from the so-called martial races, often conveniently defined as those who had remained loyal in 1857.



The first few years of direct rule saw a great deal of activity codifying and establishing new policy and rule. In 1860 an Indian Penal Code, and in 1861 a Code of Criminal Procedure, laid down the legal principles that would henceforth govern Britain's Indian subjects. In 1861 the Indian High Courts Act created high courts at Madras, Calcutta and Bombay, which exercised civil and criminal appellate jurisdiction similar to that in Britain. In 1871 the British inaugurated a decennial census in India, and seven years later a survey, instruments similar to those operating in Britain and designed to make the control of the population easier.

In the late nineteenth century India witnessed the flourishing of a nationalist movement as middle-class urban populations most especially grew frustrated with their lack of a political voice. India remained a major market for British trade, its chief export market in the early twentieth century. India, meanwhile, remained predominantly agricultural, aided by the rapid growth of railway lines to and from the major ports. And there was a huge prestige factor, for now Britain could boast the largest single territory under European rule in the world. The year 1858 represented for Britain a commitment, not only to long-term rule in India, but also to a broader, deeper vision of the British Empire than had hitherto been possible; although that year might not be a watershed in Indian history, it was a major one for the history of the British Empire.

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