

The debate about British rule in India

The rule of the British in India is possibly the most controversial and the most hotly debated aspect of the history of the British empire. Admirers of British rule point to the economic developments, the legal and administrative system, the fact that India became the centre of world politics. Critics of British rule generally point out that all of these benefits went to a tiny British ruling class and the majority of Indians gained little. Admirers of British rule counter this by saying that most Indians were poor and oppressed by their own leaders before the British arrived, and that British rule was less harsh on ordinary Indians than rule by Indian princes.

Perhaps the main reason why the arguments are so heated and so complex is that India was very different from the other territories that made up the empire. North America and Australia, for example, were sparsely populated and their populations were less economically developed than Britain. India, however, had a huge population and was just as developed as Britain in the 1700s when the British arrived.

The British were able to take control of India mainly because India was not united. The British signed treaties and made military and trading alliances with many of the independent states that made up India. The British were very effective at infiltrating these states and gradually taking control. They often left the local princes in charge of the various parts of India. These local princes were effective at maintaining British rule and gained much from being loyal to the British.

The Indian Mutiny/Rebellion, 1857-58

The largest rebellion against British rule took place in 1857-58. It was known in Britain as the Indian Mutiny. This was because it began with a rebellion by Indian troops (sepoys) serving in the army of the British East India Company. British rule in India was handled by the East India Company. Indian historians dislike the term 'mutiny' because it suggests that only Indian troops were involved. In fact, once some of the Indian troops did revolt, the rebellion against British rule spread rapidly and involved many local Indian leaders who had a wide range of complaints against British rule. The British preferred to think of the rebellion as a mutiny because this word disguised the huge scale of the rebellion. The word mutiny also covered up the involvement of ordinary Indians. The British preferred to keep this quiet as it suggested that British rule was not widely accepted in India.

The rebellion lasted about 18 months. It was brutal and vicious. The rebels committed many atrocities. They were, however, disunited and badly organised. Gradually British troops, along with the forces of Indian rulers who sided with the British, overcame them. There is a lot of evidence that the great majority of ordinary Indian peasants tried as hard as they could to stay out of the rebellion. They thought (probably rightly) that their lives would change little if they were ruled by the British or by the Indian leaders who were trying to get rid of the British. Eventually the British forces defeated the rebels. Their revenge was just as vicious as the rebels

had been, and the British and their allies committed many atrocities. The rebellion/mutiny left a lasting legacy of mistrust, fear and hatred between the British and Indians, which continued throughout the British time in charge of India. After the rebellion the British government took direct control of India away from the East India Company.

British rule - the Raj

British rule from the time after the mutiny is often called the Raj. During this period a tiny number of British officials and troops (about 20,000 in all) ruled over 300 million Indians. This was often seen as evidence that most Indians accepted and even approved of British rule. There is no doubt that Britain could not have controlled India without the co-operation of Indian princes and local leaders, as well as huge numbers of Indian troops, police officers, civil servants etc.

Other historians point out that British rule of India was maintained by the fact that Indian society was so divided that it could not unite against the British. In fact, the British encouraged these divisions. The better-off classes were educated in English schools. They served in the British army or in the civil service. They effectively joined the British to rule their poorer fellow Indians. There are huge arguments about whether the British created or enlarged these divisions in Indian society (British society was deeply divided by class), or whether the British simply took advantage of divisions that were already present in Indian society. For much of the 1800s the average Indian peasant had no more say in the way he or she was ruled than did the average worker in the United Kingdom.

The British view tended to portray British rule as a charitable exercise - they suffered India's environment (eg climate, diseases) in order to bring to India good government and economic development (eg railways, irrigation, medicine). Modern admirers of British rule also note these benefits.

Other historians point out that ruling India brought huge benefits to Britain. India's huge population made it an attractive market for British industry. In the 1880s, for example, about 20% of Britain's total exports went to India. By 1910 these exports were worth £137 million. India also exported huge quantities of goods to Britain, especially tea, which was drunk or exported on from Britain to other countries. Then there were the human resources. The Indian army was probably Britain's single greatest resource. Around 40% of India's wealth was spent on the army. This army was used by Britain all over the world, including the wars in South Africa in 1899-1902 and the First and Second World Wars. It was the backbone of the power of the British empire. In 1901, for example, the British viceroy (governor) of India, Lord Curzon, said 'As long as we rule India, we are the greatest power in the world. If we lose it, we shall straightway drop to a third-rate power'.

Did India gain or lose from British rule?

Some recent research suggests that British rule did little for India in economic terms. Britain gained hugely from ruling India, but most of the wealth created was not invested back into the country. For example, from 1860 to about 1920, economic growth in India was very slow - much slower than in Britain or America. India's population only grew by about 1% per year, which also suggests there was not much economic growth. India actually started importing food under British rule, because Indians were growing 'cash crops' like cotton and tea to be sent to Britain.

It is extremely important not to forget the terrible famines that devastated India. These were partly the result of weather, but partly caused by British policies. Food shortages came about because Indians were growing cash crops. When famine struck in 1876-77 and 1899-1900 the British system of government was completely overwhelmed and could not organise a big enough relief effort. As well as these massive famines, there were many other smaller, more localised famines.

On the other hand, research suggests that from about 1870 to 1930 Britain took about 1% of India's wealth per year. This was much less than the French, Dutch and Germans took from their lands. The British invested about £400 million in the same period. They brought in an irrigation programme, which increased the amount of land available for farming by 8 times. They developed a coal industry, which had not existed before. Public health and life expectancy increased under British rule, mainly due to improved water supplies and the introduction of quinine treatment against malaria.

Big landowners, Indian princes, the Indian middle classes all gained in terms of job opportunities, business opportunities and careers in areas like the law. Ordinary Indians gained little, but the argument still continues about whether British rule made much difference to their lives. Many historians think that the majority of Indians would have remained poor even if they had been ruled by Indians.