Indian Independence and the Question of Partition

THE **CHOICES** PROGRAM

Explore the Past… Shape the Future

History and Current Issues for the Classroom

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Acknowledgments

Contents

Introduction: Independence and Partition

The Indian subcontinent—present-day India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh—appears in newspaper headlines today for everything from rapid economic growth and riveting elections, to nuclear weapons and factory fires. Yet, less than a century ago, international headlines focused on one event in particular: the partition (division) of British India.

In August 1947, British withdrawal from the subcontinent brought an end to two centuries of colonial rule in India. This process of decolonization occurred at the same time as another momentous event, the partition of the unified subcontinent into two separate countries, India and Pakistan. (Bangladesh was formed decades later.)

The division of British India into two countries was one of the most volatile events of the twentieth century. More than one million people died and millions more became refugees in the years following partition. These consequences were unanticipated by the Indian politicians and British authorities who negotiated the terms of partition. The general public experienced widespread loss and hardship due to the decisions made by a handful of people. For decades, refugees traveled by trains or walked miles on foot to escape violence and fear.

The bloody process of partition overshadowed an objective Indians had long been fighting for—the end of British rule. In the mid-nineteenth century, the British Crown declared the Indian subcontinent a colony of its vast empire and began to exploit its people and land for economic profit. Where towns once existed, the British built railroads. In once diverse communities, the British segregated housing between Europeans and Indians. While the British claimed they were "civilizing" a barbaric and racially inferior nation, civility rarely characterized their treatment of the people they governed.

Indians' struggle for freedom from colonial rule amidst war, famine, and political change was a movement that inspired groups across the world to protest oppression carried out by governments. From prominent figures like Mohandas Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, and Mohammad Ali Jinnah, to local political and religious leaders, to everyday people, their stories of resistance have lasting impacts even today.

Historians who study these events grapple with important questions. Why did mass migration and violence overshadow Indian independence? What role did religion play in dividing communities? Was partition, the creation of India and Pakistan, inevitable? The answers to these questions and others are not only found in the decades prior to August 1947, but also hundreds of years earlier.

In the following pages, you will explore the history of Indian independence and partition. In Part I, you will read about how the British East India Company entered the Mughal Empire and established authority in the subcontinent. Part II explores life under British rule and Indians' calls for independence. The reading culminates with an in-depth look at the debates on independence and partition in the province of Bengal. The Epilogue examines the outcome of independence negotiations and the legacies of partition in Bengal and other provinces that exist to this day.

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The Great Revolt of 1857: Source Analysis

Objectives:

Students will: Review the events of the Great Revolt of 1857.

Use different types of sources to identify different perspectives on the Great Revolt of 1857.

Consider the value of using multiple points of view to analyze historical events.

Required Reading:

Before beginning the lesson, students should have read the Introduction and Part I of the student text and completed "Study Guide—Introduction and Part I" (TRB 5-6) or "Advanced Study Guide—Introduction and Part I" (TRB-7).

Scholars Online Videos:

A short, free video on the Great Revolt of 1857 that you might find useful with this lesson is available at <http://www.choices.edu/resources/scholars_india_lessons.php>.

Handouts:

"The Great Revolt of 1857: Sources" (TRB 9-10)

"The Great Revolt of 1857: Stories" (TRB 11-13)

"The Great Revolt of 1857: A Memorial" (TRB 14-15)

(The unedited versions of the stories and images are available online at <www.choices.edu/indiamaterials>.)

In the Classroom:

1. Setting the Stage—Review with students their reading on the Great Revolt of 1857. What was the role of the British East India Company in India prior to 1857? What were the immediate causes of the revolt? What were some of the other reasons behind the revolt?

2. Analyzing Sources—Divide the class into groups of three or four and distribute the three handouts to each group. Assign each group one of the handouts to complete. If time permits, you may assign more than one handout to each group.

Tell students that each group will use different types of sources to examine the Great Revolt of 1857 from British and Indian perspectives. Ask students to read the directions on their handout and answer the questions.

3. Group Responses—After small groups have completed the questions, have everyone come together in a large group. Call on small groups to share their responses to the questions. What types of sources did they review? Are there recurring themes and ideas that appear? Record them on the board.

4. Understanding Point of View—Ask students to assess the point of view of the sources. Discuss how students might recognize the point of view—through language or selective use of facts, for instance.

Review Source 3 by British historian Crispin Bates. What do students believe his point of view is on 1857? Why do they think it differs from Charles Ball in Source 1?

Ask students why the names for the events of 1857 differ? For example, why might Prime Minister Singh have called it India's "First War of Independence" rather than a mutiny or revolt?

What value do students see in using different types of sources to examine historical events? What kinds of sources would they use to explain the events of 1857?

Can students think of how being aware of differing points of view affects how they understand history? What are the benefits of considering multiple points of view?

Homework:

Students should read Part II of the student text and complete "Study Guide—Part II" (TRB 17-18) or "Advanced Study Guide—Part II" (TRB-19).

The Great Revolt of 1857: Sources

Instructions: These are excerpts from descriptions or accounts of the events of 1857. Read them and then complete the worksheet. As you read, use different colors to mark 1) words or phrases that you do not understand; and 2) the words or phrases that you believe are the most important. Answer the questions for each source. Be prepared to share your answers with your classmates.

Source 1: Charles Ball, British historian, *The History of the Indian Mutiny* (1858)

"Before entering upon the details of a military outbreak that has, by its extent and duration, astonished the whole civilised world, and which at one time threatened seriously to affect the prestige of a flag that during the past century and a-half has waved in proud supremacy over the fortresses and cities of India, and proclaimed by its presence to subjugated races the irresistible power of British valour, and the wisdom of British councils….

"We shall now proceed to inscribe upon the pages of history the frightful details of a series of catastrophes, among which the lavish outpouring of innocent blood is the least evil to be deplored; to record acts of atrocity that compel manhood to blush for the species to which it belongs, and that have indelibly stained the annals of India and its people with crimes that disgrace the name of humanity."

Source 2: Manmohan Singh, Indian prime minister (July 13, 2006)

"I do believe that this opportunity to commemorate the 150th Anniversary of the First War of Independence in 1857 should be used to recapture the spirit of our freedom struggle. I sincerely believe that a new generation of Indians must be made to feel the patriotism and the idealism of our forefathers. I also believe that this is an opportunity to derive inspiration from the unity of the Indian people exemplified in that struggle. Indians cutting across communities, religions, regions, castes and languages came together to fight for freedom from foreign rule."

Source 3: Crispin Bates, British historian, *Subalterns and the Raj: South Asia since 1600* (2007)

"The uprising was a clear sign that the East India Company had seriously misruled...[India], but they were reluctant to admit this, which is why in many subsequent British accounts 1857 is usually referred to as the 'mutiny.' By this it is implied that the insurrection was simply an act of treason by a group of soldiers that was dealt with appropriately. British descriptions of the 'mutiny' were also typically accompanied by accounts of various barbarities and horrors committed by the Indians as if to justify the violent means by which the restoration of colonial rule was accomplished. But this is not, of course, how Indians regarded the matter, then or now."

Source 1

a. Who is the author of the source and when was the source written?

b. List the words used to describe the events of 1857 (for example, "series of catastrophes").

c. Briefly summarize the most important point(s) of the source. (No more than two sentences.)

Source 2

a. Who is the author of the source and when was the source written?

b. List the words used to describe the events of 1857.

c. Briefly summarize the most important point(s) of the source. (No more than two sentences.)

Source 3

a. Who is the author of the source and when was the source written?

b. List the words used to describe the events of 1857.

c. Briefly summarize the most important point(s) of the source. (No more than two sentences.)

The Great Revolt of 1857: Stories

Instructions: These two fictional stories recount the events of 1857 from two different perspectives. Read them and then complete the worksheet. As you read, use different colors to mark 1) words or phrases that you do not understand; and 2) the words or phrases that you believe are the most important. Answer the questions for each source. Be prepared to share your answers with your classmates.

Story 1: Excerpts from *The Defence of Lucknow* (1879), by British Poet Laureate Alfred Lord Tennyson

The siege of Lucknow was one of the prolonged military confrontations of the 1857 rebellion.

"...Frail were the works that defended the hold that we held with our lives—
  Women and children among us, God help them, our children and wives!
  Hold it we might—and for fifteen days or for twenty at most.
  'Never surrender, I charge you, but every man die at his post!'…
  Death from their rifle-bullets, and death from their cannon-balls,
  Death in our innermost chamber, and death at our slight barricade,
  Death while we stood with the musket, and death while we stoop to the spade,
  Death to the dying, and wounds to the wounded, for often there fell,
  Striking the hospital wall, crashing thro' it, their shot and their shell,
  Death—for their spies were among us, their marksmen were told of our best,
  So that the brute bullet broke thro' the brain that could think for the rest;...

Handful of men as we were, we were English in heart and in limb,
  Strong with the strength of the race to command, to obey, to endure,
  Each of us fought as if hope for the garrison hung but on him;...

Praise to our Indian brothers, and let the dark face have his due!
  Thanks to the kindly dark faces who fought with us, faithful and few,
  Fought with the bravest among us, and drove them, and smote them, and slew,
  That ever upon the topmost roof our banner in India blew....

Havelock* baffled, or beaten, or butchered for all that we knew—
  Then day and night, day and night, coming down on the still-shattered walls
  Millions of musket-bullets, and thousands of cannon-balls—
  But ever upon the topmost roof our banner of England blew....

All on a sudden the garrison utter a jubilant shout,
  Havelock's glorious Highlanders answer with conquering cheers,
  Sick from the hospital echo them, women and children come out,
  Blessing the wholesome white faces of Havelock's good fusileers,
  …saved!—we are saved!—is it you? is it you?
  Saved by the valour of Havelock, saved by the blessing of Heaven!
  'Hold it for fifteen days!' we have held it for eighty-seven!
  And ever aloft on the palace roof the old banner of England blew."

*Havelock was the British general leading the forces sent to help the British troops at Lucknow.

Story 2: *Autobiography of the Old Banyan Tree*

This story was narrated to Badri Narayan by an elderly woman named Bhagwanti Devi from Duari, North India on January 10, 2007.

"I am an old banyan tree. I am the living history of the 1857 revolt. I have seen the entire revolt unfolding before my eyes. Now I am old and frail. My branches are bowed down with the weight of age. They are no longer covered with fresh green leaves, but look more like arms of skeletons. Thousands of people pass by me everyday but no one spares me a second glance. Birds don't make nests in my branches any more. Squirrels don't scurry up and down my trunk with nuts, looking for holes to hide them in. But although I have no strength in my branches today, once they were so strong that 137 Indians were hanged from them during the 1857 revolt. Under orders from the British officers, their soldiers used to drag the Indian revolutionaries by horses up to me.

"But sadly, no one sheds a tear at the memory of those dead dalits [a dalit is a member of the untouchable caste]. I have not become a memorial like other trees where Indian revolutionaries were hanged. No one prays at my roots like they do at other trees. There are no sounds of bells near me and no incense sticks are stuck in my roots. No flower garlands are hung on my branches. Today thick bushes have grown around me and I am overrun with weeds. Everything is still and quiet and there is an aura of sorrow surrounding me. But even today I can hear the sounds of horses galloping, the screams of revolutionaries and the firing of canons. I am an old banyan tree, relegated to the margins of history.

"They used to then tie ropes around the necks of the prisoners and throw the other end like lassoes on my branches. The ropes were then pulled till the necks of the prisoners broke. After they were sure that the men were dead, they dragged the bodies to the river Ganga and threw them into the water. Most of the men who were killed in this manner were dalits or belonged to other downtrodden castes and were mostly poor daily wage earners. They were all burning with the fire of the revolution to see their country free from the British, but I am sorry to say, their names are not mentioned anywhere in the history of the revolution.

"I am telling you all this because I want you to understand that I am not merely a banyan with branches and roots. I am a witness to the history of our country. I still remember the day of 4 June 1857 when the spark of revolution that was ignited in Meerut burst into fire in Kanpur.... When I remember the cruelty of the British while punishing the revolutionaries I still get shivers up my spine.

"But I was really broken that day when 137 poor dalits were hanged as a group from my branches. Their necks were tied to the branches and the other ends of the ropes were pulled mercilessly by the British army officers till all of them had died. That day I wept so loudly that my throat became parched. I cried and cried till all my tears had dried. Even today when I recall that agonising incident I break down in a flood of tears."

Story 1

a. Who is the author of the poem and when was the poem written?

b. How does this poem describe the actions of the British?

c. How does this poem describe the actions of Indians?

d. What important idea(s) does the author express about the events of 1857?

Story 2

a. Who is the author of the story and when was the story recorded?

b. How does this story describe the actions of the British?

c. How does this story describe the actions of Indians?

d. What important idea(s) does the author express about the events of 1857?

The Great Revolt of 1857: A Memorial

Instructions: These images are of a memorial built by the British in Delhi in 1863. Use the information in the captions to answer the questions that follow on the worksheet. Be prepared to share your answers with your classmates.
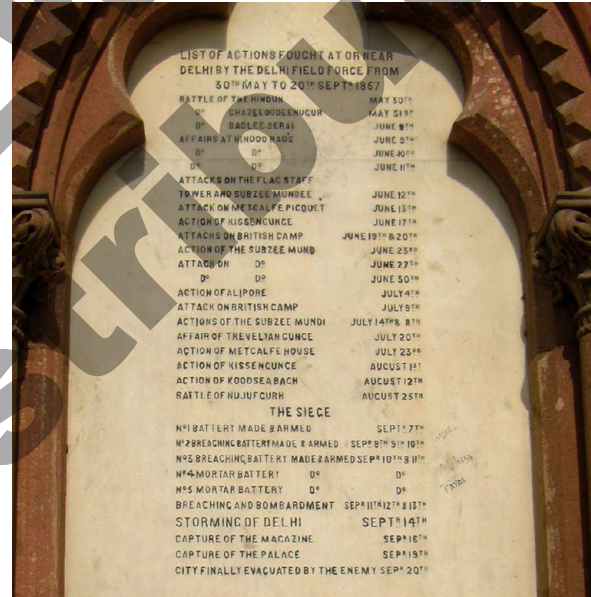
Image 1

In 1863, the British built this memorial in the city of Delhi to memorialize the deaths of 3,028 Europeans and their "native" allies in the Delhi Field Force during the revolt of 1857. The British called the memorial "The Mutiny Memorial." The memorial still stands in Delhi. In 1972, the Indian government renamed the memorial "Ajitgarh" or "Place of the Unvanquished" (unvanquished means unconquered).
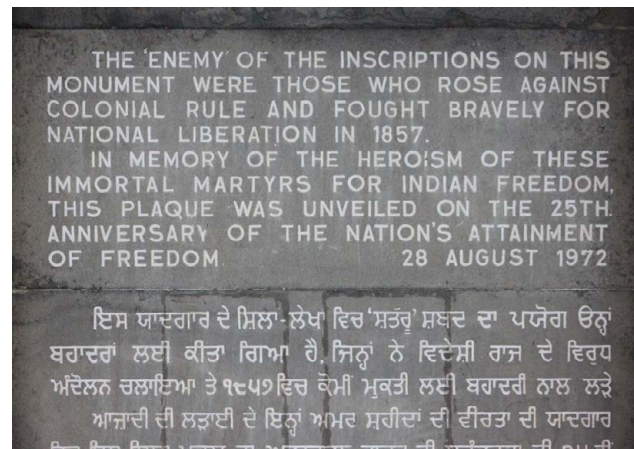
Image 2

This plaque was part of the memorial built by the British. It is a list of the actions of the Delhi Field Force from May 30, 1857 to September 20, 1857. The last line reads, "City finally evacuated by the enemy Sepr the 20."

Image 3

This plaque was added by the Indian government in 1972. It refers to the last line of the plaque (Image 2) that the British installed in 1863.

Image 1

a. What name did the British give to the memorial?

b. What name did the Indian government give to the memorial?

c. Why do you think the Indian government changed the name?

Image 2

a. Who is the "enemy" referred to in this caption?

b. Who considered them the "enemy"?

Image 3

a. When was this plaque added to the memorial and by whom?

b. How does this plaque describe the actions of the "enemy"?

c. What does this plaque state the "enemy" was fighting for?