

South Asia Today

Introduction: Behind a Conflict

As army trucks go one way, they are met by refugees fleeing in the opposite direction. It is 2002, but it may as well be 1947, 1965, 1971, or 1999. Indian and Pakistani troops are shelling one another across the LoC—the Line of Control that separates Indian from Pakistani Kashmir. Although not as well known, it is a conflict as old and as tragic as the one between Israelis and Palestinians.

While Pakistan points to a repressive “occupying” force of Indian troops, India counters with condemnation of Muslim “terrorists.” There have been as many as one million troops in Kashmir. Since 1947, more than thirty thousand soldiers have died. Today, both India and Pakistan have nuclear weapons.

And still the refugees walk down the road. One refugee, Rma Chopra, told the British news service BBC, “There have always been tense times here, but today they’re talking about missiles and nuclear war as if it’s a routine option. I’ve never felt so scared.”

Fourteen year-old Anjali, whose family left its farm in December, has fled her home four times during the past few years. She said wearily, “I just wish India and Pakistan could find a solution once and for all.”

In order to find a solution, one must first

understand how such a conflict began. To understand the conflict in Kashmir, one must first examine the period of British colonial rule to understand why there are an India and a Pakistan today.

The Jewel in the Crown

At its peak, the British Empire ruled lands on every continent, possessed the world’s most powerful navy, and dominated the world economy. Great Britain considered India (which at the time included the lands that make up India and Pakistan today), to be one of its most prized possessions. India was often referred to as the jewel in the crown of the British Empire.

“...the land and the people of Hindustan [India], that most truly bright and precious gem in the crown of the Queen, the possession of which, more than that of all your Colonial dominions, has raised in power, in resource, in wealth and in authority this small island home of ours far above the level of the majority of nations and of States—has placed it on an equality with, perhaps even in a position of superiority over, every other Empire either of ancient or of modern times.”

—Lord Randolph Churchill, Speech to Parliament, 1885

Although the British reaped tremendous economic rewards from this colony, they justified their nearly-two centuries of rule not by what they were taking, but by what they were giving to India. The British believed that



Chappatte—www.globecartoon.com. Used with permission.

Part I: India's Early History

More than four thousand years ago, in what is now Pakistan and northwest India, Harappa and Mohenjo-daro thrived as the world's first planned cities, with streets laid in grid patterns. Residents developed a form of writing, a sophisticated sewage system, and were perhaps the first to spin and weave cotton. Although these brick-built cities were reconstructed over and over again, eventually they disappeared from history.

Later, speakers of Indo-European languages settled among the rivers of the Punjab, created a society based on the Sanskrit language, a powerful priesthood known as Brahmins, and a hierarchical social structure that later became known by the Portuguese word caste. They domesticated horses and cattle, and with the discovery of iron (c. 1000 B.C.E.), they began using axes to clear land and plows to grow crops.

What was Vedism?

Their religion, Vedism (sometimes known as Brahmanism) was based upon sacrifices to gods representing the natural forces of the world. Chief among these was Indra, god of war and rainstorms. This religion did not yet include a belief in reincarnation. It would take many more centuries before Vedism would evolve into Hinduism.

By the fifth century C.E. these people developed two epic stories written in verse. The *Mahabharata*, of which the *Bhagavad Gita* is a part, dealt with the succession of kings and with the importance of following the rules of one's caste. A few centuries later, the *Ramayana* told the story of the courageous and virtuous ruler, Lord Ramachandra. This great leader was actually Rama, the seventh reincarnation of the god Vishnu, who had come to free the world from evil forces. To this day, many Hindus believe that Rama's rule was the ideal Hindu state.

Over time, numerous rulers, including Alexander the Great, claimed parts of the Indian subcontinent. Most of these kingdoms were small and short-lived. However, in the third century B.C.E. the Mauryas ruled per-

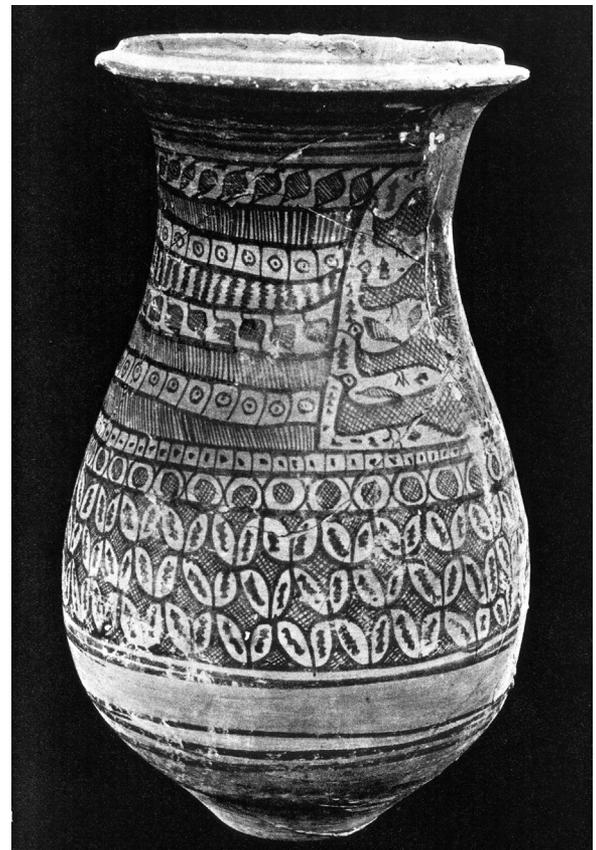
haps the largest empire ever created by an Indian dynasty. Their greatest leader, Ashoka, built roads, established a large administration for collecting taxes and

dispensing justice, and showed remarkable tolerance toward all religious sects. Influenced by the Buddhist faith founded two hundred years earlier in India, Ashoka spread throughout his empire the concept of *dharma*—piety and decency toward humans and animals alike.

The first five hundred years C.E. produced a golden age of literature, art, and science.

**“Who touches India
touches history.”**

— Winston Churchill



A vase from the ancient city of Harappa.

Reproduced from *Early India and Pakistan*.

Kalidasa (known in the West as the “Indian Shakespeare”) wrote exceptional plays in Sanskrit, Indian astronomers calculated the length of the solar year more accurately than the Greeks, and their mathematicians introduced the concept of zero and correctly calculated *pi*. People conducted trade with the Roman Empire, and the Great Silk Road connected India to China.

India always had a mysterious hold on other parts of the world. The ancient Greek historian Herodotus wrote of remarkable ants that dug gold from the ground and trees that were covered with wool (cotton). Although few Europeans besides Alexander had ventured into this Asian land, the spread of Buddhism into China had brought Chinese pilgrims, along with merchants, to India. In addition, the remarkable spread of Islam was to change the subcontinent forever.

How did the spread of Islam change the subcontinent?

In the early 700s, Muhammad ibn Qasim, cousin to the Muslim Governor of Iraq, conquered Sind in northwest India (now part of Pakistan). He placed a *jizya* on non-Muslims (tax paid in lieu of military service), but allowed Hindus and Buddhists freedom of worship. Ibn Qasim made no further inroads into India, but about three hundred years later Mahmud of Ghazni (now part of Afghanistan) raided India sixteen times, killing many but gaining little territory. A strong religious belief and the promise of great wealth motivated Muslim raiders. In about 1200, another Muslim warrior, Muhammad of Ghor (Afghanistan), invaded northern India, defeated an alliance of Hindu princes, and conquered a kingdom that included Delhi.

For the next three hundred years India was beset by more invasions by Muslims, who

The Mughal Empire

For some scholars, the history of modern India begins with the Mughal Empire, which ruled through the same family for approximately 150 years. The first of the family was Babur, an invader from Central Asia. Babur, who died in 1530, descended from the Mongol people (therefore the name “Mughal”) and was a Muslim. Upon first entering India, he and his soldiers were disappointed. Babur complained: “no good horses, no good dogs, no grapes, musk-melons or first-rate fruits, no ice or cold water ... no colleges, no candles, no torches, and no candlesticks.” However, he managed to convince his men to stay. Although his army was small, he had the advantages of firearms (matchlocks and cannon) and enemies who were constantly fighting amongst themselves. Babur and his son Humayun carved out a mighty empire.

Why has Akbar been called India’s greatest ruler?

Akbar, Babur’s grandson, has been called India’s greatest ruler. By 1600, his empire held approximately 100 million of India’s 140 million people. (In contrast, England had a population of five million and all of Western Europe less than forty million.) The empire’s wealth was measured not only in silver and gold but also in its crops and trade. Indian craftsmen were noted for their beautiful cotton textiles, which were in demand in other parts of Asia. (England’s East India Company was founded in 1600, in part, to capitalize on this trade.)

Akbar demonstrated great tolerance toward other religions. He married Hindu princesses, who probably did not have to convert to Islam. He abolished the *jizya*, or tax on non-Muslims. Many of his highest officials were Hindu. He declared *sulahkul*, or universal tolerance. Going further, he decreed himself to be the spiritual leader of his people—giving himself the final word on religious controversies. He said, “For an empire to be ruled by one head, it is a bad thing to have the members divided among themselves....” Ironically, while these measures won him the loyalty of many Hindus, Muslim religious leaders considered their emperor to be a heretic.

themselves were being pushed east by Mongol armies from Central Asia. Not only did Muslims fight Hindus; Muslims fought one another. For example, in 1398, Tamurlane's Mongols, who were Muslims, defeated the Sultan of Delhi and destroyed much of the city. Beginning in the 1500s, the Muslim Mughal Empire ruled India for seven generations. The Mughals reformed government, encouraged artistry, and worked to unite their subjects. Nevertheless, at the local level, Hindu land controllers and clan-leaders called *zamindars* continued to exercise considerable influence.

Hindu, Muslim, and Sikh

Hinduism, which evolved from Vedism, has no single founder or historical beginning. While no single vision of Hinduism exists, the *Bhagavad Gita*, among the best-known Hindu texts, discusses the importance of following one's caste obligations. Hinduism continued

to develop over centuries, further elevating the priesthood, or Brahmans, and adding rich layers of belief and ritual. One followed the rules of one's caste in order to be reborn into a higher caste and eventually find final release, or *moksha*, in Brahman. In this case, Brahman does not mean "priest" but rather the universal soul or ultimate reality.

Hindus can experience Brahman through many gods and goddesses, such as Brahma the Creator, Vishnu the Preserver, and Siva the Destroyer. Nature is worshipped, such as trees, the sun and moon. So too are animals, such as the bull that Siva rides. The cow is especially sacred. Gods can even take the form of animals as well as men. For example, Vishnu took incarnations as a fish, a tortoise, a boar, a man-lion, and a charioteer. Many Hindus, especially those of upper castes, are vegetarians.

Hinduism is filled with rituals which help people move from the outer physical reality

Under Akbar's grandson, Shah Jahan, dubbed "King of the World," the Mughal Empire reached its greatest splendor. He rebuilt his capital of Delhi, giving it large thoroughfares, waterways, stone walls enclosing 6,400 acres, and the Jama Masjid—what was then the largest mosque in the world. He also built the Taj Mahal to honor his dead wife.

How did the Mughals diminish their own power?

The last great Mughal emperor, and the one who ruled the longest (1658—1707) was Shah Jahan's son, Aurangzeb. Unlike earlier Mughal rulers, Aurangzeb was a devout Muslim and quite strict in his beliefs. He appointed a censor who supervised public places to make certain there was no gambling or drinking liquor. He eliminated dancers, musicians, and artists from his court. He passed discriminatory measures against Hindus, such as restoring the *jizya*, making Hindu merchants pay heavier duties, and he destroyed newly built or rebuilt temples. He continued to make war against various opponents, often the Marathas—Hindu rulers to the south, and further extended his empire so that he governed most of the subcontinent.

The cost of these wars depleted the imperial treasury. When Aurangzeb died, his successors fought one another, further weakening royal authority. As provincial governors took on more and more authority, they became, in effect, greater rulers than their emperor. While they continued to send him a token tribute, he had lost any real power.

The empire had also been weakened by continued revolts of Hindu princes, especially the Marathas, who inhabited the rough hills of the Western Ghats. Their greatest leader, Shivaji, who lived during the time of Aurangzeb, was famous for his Robin Hood-like exploits. As one example, when a cornered Shivaji was about to surrender, he instead killed his opponent and captured the enemy army. Aurangzeb called him "the mountain rat." Just as, centuries later, Muslims looked back with pride on the achievements of the Mughal Empire, Hindu nationalists referred to the exploits of Shivaji.

Bhaktism and Sufism

There were attempts to bring together the two seemingly irreconcilable faiths of Hinduism and Islam. The bhakti movement, at least as old as the seventh century, simplified Hinduism into the love of an individual for his or her personal god—usually Vishnu or Siva. Instead of the elaborate rituals of Hinduism, a follower of bhakti would recite his/her god’s name over and over, sing hymns, wear the god’s emblem, and make pilgrimages to holy places. The devotion was intensely personal.

The bhakti movement may have influenced the Sufis, Muslim mystics who believed that the soul was in exile from God and longed to return. Loving God was key. Like the bhaktis, Sufis rejected the formality of their faith.

“Too long the mosque and monastery have stifled you. One day at least set out at dawn and spend the day in [the] garden where red roses grow.”

—Kabir (1440—1518), son of Muslim weavers, a Sufi poet

to one of the spirit. Some rituals include the marriage ceremony, naming the child, and carrying him or her to face the rising sun for the first time. Loud music, singing, and dancing often accompany celebrations. The rich variety of gods and rituals allows Hindus great latitude. In fact, they often welcome other faiths as simply different paths to Brahman. For example, Buddhism, which was so successful in other parts of Asia, has in many ways been absorbed into Hinduism, with Hindus believing that Buddha was a divine incarnation.

How did Muslim invaders react to Hinduism?

When the eighth-century Muslim invaders first encountered Hindus in India, their reaction was mixed. Abu Raihan al-Biruni, a Muslim scientist and historian, marveled at Hindu achievements in the arts and sciences. Regarding the reservoirs constructed at holy places, he wrote, “...our people when they see them wonder at them and are unable to describe them, much less to construct anything like them.”

Yet Muslims were shocked at the religious beliefs of Hinduism. Islam is based upon strict monotheism; it is forbidden even to draw an image of God or the prophet Mohammed. Muslims found the myriad gods of Hinduism to be the worst form of idolatry. Emphasizing the equality of all believers before God, they also criticized the caste system and the idea of

reincarnation.

For their part, many Hindus resented Muslim slaughter of cows for food. In addition, the vast majority of Indian Muslims were Hindu converts, who descended from groups that had converted to Islam for a variety of reasons. This made social relations between the two religious groups more difficult. However, Muslim rulers generally treated Hindus with great tolerance. Partly this was due to simple mathematics; Muslims were a small minority in India.

An exchange of customs was inevitable. For example, many Hindus adopted (Muslim) Persian clothing. Some would argue that Muslims were not influenced by Hindus but simply retained Hindu customs they had followed before conversion to Islam. Nevertheless, some Muslims used social distinctions similar to the caste system and adopted the Hindu practices of early marriage and opposition to widow remarriage.

What were the beliefs of the Sikhs?

Another religious leader, the Guru Nanak (1469—1539), emphasized a simple life dedicated to love of the divine name. Through this anyone could escape the cycle of rebirth. He did not accept the religious necessity for castes and insisted that all his followers take their meals together and lead an ethical life.

His followers, known as Sikhs (disciples), were mostly peaceful farmers. However, during the next two hundred years they were persecuted by the Mughals. Two later gurus were killed, in part, for mixing in royal Mughal politics. So were two sons of the last guru, Guru Gobind Singh; when the boys refused to convert, they were buried alive inside a city wall.

Because of these persecutions and because he believed his people should be defenders of justice, Guru Gobind Singh transformed his followers into a disciplined religious order called *Khalsa* (pure). Later the Sikhs would prove to be formidable warriors. Defeated by the British in 1846 then again in 1849, the Sikhs, along with the Gurkhas of Nepal, became the backbone of the British Indian Army.

The British East India Company

After a Dutch company made tremendous profits trading with the spice islands (East Indies), eighty English merchants joined together to form the British East India Company in 1600. Timid traders compared to the Portuguese and Dutch (a Portuguese captain said they came from “an island of no import”), they strove to avoid conflict and concentrated on amassing wealth.

“...War and traffic [trade] are incompatible.... Let this be received as a rule, that, if you will profit, seek it at sea, and in quiet trade; for without controversy it is an error to affect garrisons and land wars in India.”

—Sir Thomas Roe,
the first royal envoy to India

In 1665, the Company gained Bombay from Portugal as part of the dowry of a Portuguese princess married to British King Charles II. In 1696, the Mughals allowed the Company a new settlement. It was known as Fort William and later Calcutta. Great Britain began to grow wealthy through trade.

How did wars between France and Great Britain change the East India Company?

During a series of wars between France and Great Britain, the French *Compagnie des Indes* (Company of the Indies) challenged the East India Company’s position in India. The governor of the French settlements, François Dupleix, initially had great success by realizing two things. First, a small, well-equipped and well-trained European army could defeat a much larger but slower moving and ill-disciplined enemy. Indian armies contained as many as 100,000 people, yet most were servants or family members. Second, because the various rulers of India fought so much among themselves, a small European force could tip the victory either way. Dupleix was able to manipulate many of the local rulers in France’s favor, but ultimately a brilliant young Englishman, Robert Clive, defeated the French.

Clive, who had started in the Company as a young clerk, transferred to its military and won spectacular victories against overwhelming odds at Arcot and Trichinopoly. But as great as his courage and intelligence were, his cunning was most important. At the Battle of Plassey in 1757, Clive bribed the uncle of his enemy to stay out of the battle. As a result, the British won, and Clive made the uncle the new *Nawab*, or ruler, of Bengal and Bihar. The Nawab became Clive’s puppet, giving the Company the right to collect taxes. The British drained the province of its wealth.

Why did the British government increase its role in India?

While individuals like Clive grew fabulously wealthy, the Company itself nearly went bankrupt. As a result, the British government began supervising the Company more closely. In 1773, Warren Hastings became India’s first Governor-General but was advised to proceed cautiously. Although he claimed not to favor British domination of India, Hastings used military force and clever diplomacy to bring more territory, either directly or through local rulers, under British control.

Lord Wellesley, the fifth Governor-General, had quite a different view of his country’s role.

With the help of his younger brother Arthur (later the Duke of Wellington who defeated Napoleon), Wellesley conquered additional territory along the eastern coast and in the southern peninsula in the late 1790s.

“...no greater blessing can be conferred on the native inhabitants of India than the extension of British authority.”

—Lord Wellesley

The East India Company, angered by the expenses that these campaigns incurred, recalled Wellesley to Great Britain. Future governors-general maintained the same firm control over British India, either through direct conquest or through buying the loyalty of local rulers. Eventually India encompassed eleven provinces under direct British rule, and 582 princely states (the latter composing one-third of India’s territory and one-fourth of its population) indirectly under British control. The acquisition of India brought Great Britain vast wealth and power, making it the largest and wealthiest empire in the world.

“Without that empire [India] and the naval power that cemented it she [Great Britain] was but a medium-sized European country. With it, she was great among the greatest, boasting a worldwide Pax Britannica. Without India, the subordinate empire would be scarcely more than a string of colonial beads.”

—A.V. Hodson, advisor to the Viceroy of India

The Mutiny of 1857

By the mid-nineteenth century, the British not only controlled most of the Indian subcontinent politically, they also exerted a great cultural influence. In 1813, Christian missionaries were given free access to India. A law passed in 1850 gave Christian converts from Hinduism the right to inherit their ancestral property. *Sati*, the custom by which a widow was burned to death on the funeral pyre of her

dead husband, was made illegal in 1829. English became the official language for education instead of Persian, Arabic, and Sanskrit. These policies and British arrogance angered both Muslims and Hindus, especially the religious leaders belonging to the Brahman caste.

“...a single shelf of a good European library is worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia.”

—English scholar T.B. Macaulay

Native rulers objected to a policy under which the British government could take control of a state whose ruler either was deemed unfit or who died without a direct male heir. Under this policy, in 1856 Governor-General Dalhousie annexed Awadh (also called Oudh)—the largest, perhaps richest, and most loyal of the Indian states. In addition, Dalhousie had changed the old Mughal ruler’s title from emperor to king and ordered that the king’s son would inherit only the title of prince.

The Indian army, which consisted mostly of *sepoys* (native soldiers), was known for its loyalty. Yet, over the years British insensitivity often caused incidents of unrest and small mutinies. In 1806 sepoys at Vellore killed over one hundred British soldiers when ordered not to display religious marks on their faces and to wear leather stockings and hats (leather, coming from a cow, was forbidden to Hindus). In 1824 at Barrackpore, another mutiny, over the fear of traveling overseas (which Hindus believed could endanger one’s caste), led to more deaths, executions, and the disbandment of an entire regiment.

What was the immediate cause of the 1857 mutiny?

In 1857, the new Enfield rifle was introduced to British troops. The rifle’s cartridges, which were greased, had to be bitten open, then rammed down the barrel. Rumors (later determined to be true) spread through the army that the tallow used to grease the cartridges was made of cow and pig fat, the former forbidden to be eaten by Hindus, the



Courtesy of the National Army Museum.

A group of mutineers.

latter by Muslims.

On April 24, at Meerut, the 3rd Light Cavalry was ordered on parade to learn the new firing drill. Eighty-five of the ninety sepoy, both Hindu and Muslim, refused to touch the cartridges unless every other regiment agreed to handle them. Two weeks later, court-martialed in front of the entire command, the eighty-five sepoy were stripped of their uniforms and shackled. Most were sentenced to ten years of hard labor.

Ignoring warnings by friendly sepoy, the British were completely surprised when a mutiny broke out the day after the court martial (Sunday, May 10). Sepoy killed about fifty British men, women, and children. One Englishwoman was stabbed to death, while another woman's clothes caught on fire, causing her to burn to death.

Mutineers from Meerut entered Delhi, where more of the British were massacred.

These mutineers, joined by others in the city, declared their allegiance to Bahadur Shah II, the blind, eighty-two year old King of Delhi and former Mughal Emperor.

The mutiny grew into a large-scale rebellion that spread across northern and central India. Sepoy were joined by others who either had grievances against the British or who simply wanted to loot. At Cawnpore, a Company trading center on the Ganges River, the sepoy mutinied. Nana Sahib, a Hindu noble who earlier had lost a pension from the British, took leadership of the Cawnpore revolt and allowed the outnumbered British to surrender with a promise of safe conduct. However, when the British tried to reach the Ganges, they were attacked. The men were murdered, the surviving women and children taken prisoner. For several weeks they were cared for, but when a British rescue army approached, sepoy shot and stabbed to death the 73 women and 124 children.

“May all the enemies of the Faith be killed today, and the [foreigners] be destroyed root and branch.”

—Bahadur Shah II

How did the British troops respond to the violence?

Angered by this massacre, British troops themselves murdered many townspeople. Before being hanged, condemned sepoys were forced to swallow beef or pork, or made to lick the bloodstained walls and floors of the house where the English women and children were massacred. In some cases, captured mutineers were strapped to the barrels of cannon and blown apart. Bahadur Shah II, the old King of Delhi whom the rebels chose as their symbolic leader, was put on trial, addressed by members of the court as *tum* (used for servants), and sentenced to exile in Rangoon (Burma), where he died in 1862.

Many in England were as angry with the mutineers as their countrymen in India.

“I wish I were Commander in Chief in India.... I should do my utmost to exterminate the Race upon whom the stain of the late cruelties rested...to blot it out of humankind and raze it off the face of the earth.”

—Charles Dickens, English author

Not all Indians sided with the mutinous sepoys. In fact, loyal sepoys fought along side the British to maintain their hold on India.

Two Peoples—Two Standards

Although British and native troops fought side by side, there was little social interaction between the two peoples. In general, the British believed themselves to be superior because they were descended from Greek and Roman civilization, practiced Christianity, and, according to a British textbook, demonstrated “... a reckless devotion to great causes, an unflinching pursuit of untrodden paths.”

The British expected courage from themselves, because they were vastly outnumbered by Indians and believed that they could not afford to show weakness or permit defeat. British troops did indeed show great courage in India.

“...you forget that you are dealing with a Briton—one of that band who never brooks an insult even from an equal, much less from a native of this land.... A Briton, even though alone amongst a thousand of your kind, shall be respected, though it brought about his death. That’s how we hold the world.”

—General John Nicholson

How common was racial discrimination?

Besides considering themselves more courageous, the British also believed themselves more intelligent than the sepoys they commanded. This British sense of superiority was demonstrated not only in the battlefield, but in daily life as well. In part, this superiority was due to an unwillingness to think of India as anything more than part of the empire. The British community always remained British—never Indian.

Although not stated openly, discrimination was common. At department stores, Indians would wait while Englishmen who had come in after them were served first. Even wealthy Indian families would be denied entrance into first class compartments on railroads. Socialization between the two peoples was frowned upon. For an Englishman to court or marry an Indian woman was considered a betrayal of his race. It was considered even worse for an Englishwoman to engage in such activity. In tea rooms, English and Indians would usually be seated separately. In the military, British soldiers were separated from the sepoys.

These racial attitudes help explain why so few of the British really understood India or its native peoples. They also fueled the Indian drive for independence.