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British imperialism in India

British imperialism in India left a lasting impact, shaping the country's economic, social, and political landscape. Though some argue that British rule introduced modern infrastructure and governance, the empire's presence in India was largely defined by economic exploitation, human rights abuses, and systemic oppression. The consequences of British rule continue to affect India today, from economic disparities to political tensions.

One of the most damaging effects of British imperialism was economic exploitation. Before British control, India was a major economic power, contributing nearly 25% of the world's GDP in the early 18th century. However, by the time the British left in 1947, this number had fallen to 4%. The British systematically drained India's wealth, extracting an estimated \$45 trillion. They destroyed local industries, such as textiles, and forced India to buy British-made goods. Indian laborers built the railway system, but it primarily served British economic interests, transporting resources for export rather than benefiting the Indian people. Furthermore, British shareholders profited from the railway system while Indian taxpayers bore the financial burden.

British policies also contributed to devastating famines. The most infamous example was the Bengal Famine of 1943, which killed up to four million people. During this time,

Winston Churchill diverted food supplies to British soldiers and stockpiles in Europe, leaving Indian civilians to starve. When confronted with the crisis, Churchill blamed the famine on the victims, stating that they “bred like rabbits.” This famine was not an isolated incident. Throughout British rule, colonial policies often prioritized economic gain over Indian lives, leading to repeated food shortages and millions of preventable deaths.

The British also used political manipulation to maintain control. Their “divide and rule” strategy deepened religious and social divisions, particularly between Hindus and Muslims. This tactic ultimately contributed to the violent Partition of India in 1947, which displaced over 15 million people and resulted in the deaths of up to two million. As people migrated to their newly created nations—Hindu-majority India and Muslim-majority Pakistan—trains became sites of mass murder, with entire carriages of refugees being massacred. The British had the opportunity to manage a peaceful transition but instead rushed the process, leaving chaos and violence in their wake.

Beyond economic and political damage, British rule was marked by brutal human rights abuses. One of the most infamous events was the Jallianwala Bagh Massacre in 1919. British troops, under General Dyer, fired upon a peaceful gathering, killing hundreds and wounding thousands. The massacre was followed by further humiliations, such as forcing Indians to crawl on their bellies in the streets. Instead of condemning Dyer’s actions, the British government rewarded him with praise and financial gifts, showing complete disregard for Indian lives.

Another lesser-known but equally cruel system was the use of indentured servitude. After the abolition of slavery, the British replaced enslaved workers with Indian laborers who were tricked or coerced into signing long-term contracts. They were sent to British colonies such as Guyana, Trinidad, and South Africa, where they endured horrific conditions similar to slavery. Many never saw their homeland again, and their descendants still struggle with the effects of this forced migration.

Despite claims that British rule modernized India, much of the infrastructure and governance they introduced served their own interests. The education system, often cited as a benefit of colonial rule, was designed to train a small group of Indians to act as intermediaries between the British and the general population. It was never meant to educate the masses. Similarly, British-built railways and bureaucratic institutions were primarily tools for economic and administrative control. When India finally gained independence, it was left with a deeply unequal society, high illiteracy rates, and extreme poverty.

The effects of British imperialism continue to shape India's economy, politics, and social structures today. Economically, the colonial-era extraction of wealth and deindustrialization left India struggling with poverty and underdevelopment at the time of independence. Even now, economic inequality remains a challenge, with rural poverty and industrial disparities rooted in colonial policies. Politically, the British "divide and rule" strategy deepened religious and regional divisions, contributing to ongoing tensions between India and Pakistan. The violent legacy of Partition still fuels conflicts, particularly over Kashmir. Additionally, many of India's

bureaucratic institutions, while modernized, retain the inefficiencies of colonial-era governance, often prioritizing hierarchy and control over public welfare. Socially, the British education system, which was designed for a small elite, created disparities in access to quality education, an issue India continues to address. Furthermore, the effects of indentured servitude linger in the Indian diaspora, where communities in former British colonies still grapple with the consequences of forced migration. While India has made significant strides in development, the legacy of British imperialism remains embedded in many of its present-day challenges.