THE DECOLONIZATION OF INDIA

The Golden Temple at Amritsar, India

Unit Overview

Following World War II, the British crown granted full independence to those living on the Indian subcontinent. Although most people anticipated this action, conflicts developed over the guiding principles of the new state. The Muslims won their bid for a separation from India. They formed two countries, Pakistan and Bangladesh. This did not, however, resolve the problems among Muslims, Hindus and other religious sects. Let’s see how it all happened.

<table>
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<th>Timeline of Events</th>
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<td>1947 Britain granted independence to India and Pakistan.</td>
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<td>1947 Jawaharlal Nehru became India’s first prime minister.</td>
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<td>1973 Bangladesh declared its independence from Pakistan.</td>
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<td>1983 Civil war erupted in Sri Lanka.</td>
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<td>1984 Sikh separatists occupied the Golden Temple in Punjab.</td>
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Pressure for Independence

While China evolved into a unified communist nation, India was also transforming. Following World War 1, the Indian National Congress Party and its leader Mahatma Gandhi opposed the British control of India with nonviolence and civil disobedience. With a philosophy that reflected Western thought along with traditional Indian values, Gandhi promoted the ideas of democracy and nationalism. He rejected the country’s traditional caste system and advocated equal rights for all Indians, including women. During the 1920s and 1930s, the Congress Party launched a series of boycotts that encouraged Indians not to buy British products.

Indians especially resented the Salt Laws. They could not produce, collect or sell salt. Natives were forced to buy salt from the British who taxed the product. Mahatma Gandhi and his followers organized the Salt March as a protest. His choice to ignore strict rules protecting the British monopoly on salt resulted in the imprisonment of Gandhi and thousands of others. The Congress Party responded by staging massive rallies. At the same time, newspaper accounts focusing on British brutality were published around the world. This forced Britain to grant India some degree of self-government in 1937, but Gandhi and his followers continued to step up their demands.
The Congress Party was not the only active political group on the subcontinent. Its chief rival was the Muslim League led by Mohammad Ali Jinnah. This organization wanted to prevent the Hindu domination of India and insisted that Muslims had the right to declare their own state. Mahatma Gandhi and other members of the Congress Party opposed this concept. They believed that this would only increase the hostility between Muslims and Hindus. In 1940, Jinnah petitioned the British government to grant Muslims and Hindus separate homelands by dividing India. Although World War II interrupted the implementation of this plan, both sides agreed to the partition. The nations of India and Pakistan, which together accounted for one-fifth of the world’s population, gained independence on August 14, 1947.

STOP: Answer Section B Questions

Pakistan and Bangladesh

However, the transition to an independent India composed primarily of Hindus and an independent Pakistan made up of mostly Muslims was not smooth or peaceful. In the weeks that followed, an estimated 100,000 Hindus and Muslims were
massacred. Mass expulsions turned over five million people into refugees. Leaders of the Congress Party and the Muslim League spoke out against the violence but were unable to stop it. Mahatma Gandhi, considered by many to be the father of Indian independence, was assassinated by a Hindu fanatic in January of 1948. The relationship between India and Pakistan remained tense as fighting erupted over control of the Kashmir region. Its Hindu king decided that Kashmir would join India over the objection of the province’s Muslim majority. They wanted to be part of Pakistan. A number of battles have been fought over this disputed territory, including one in 1999.

Map Showing the Borders of India, Pakistan and Bangladesh

The challenge of governing Pakistan was compounded by the fact that the nation was divided by over one thousand miles of Indian land. The eastern and western
sections of the country were Muslim in faith. However, they were vastly different in terms of language, culture and ethnic background. The Bengalis living in East Pakistan accounted for the majority of the new nation’s population, but West Pakistan controlled the central government. Therefore, political decisions favored the western sector and often ignored the needs of the eastern one. By the end of the 1960s, the Bengali leaders were demanding their own independent state. The Pakistani government rejected their request, declared martial law and imprisoned the Bengali leadership on charges of treason. In spite of these harsh measures, the Bengalis revolted in 1971 and won their independence in 1973. East Pakistan became the nation of Bangladesh, one of world’s poorest and most densely populated countries. Since their separation, both Pakistan and Bangladesh have experienced unstable governments, political assassinations and a lack of social progress, especially for women.

STOP: Answer Section C Questions

India’s Political and Religious Divisions

To achieve independence, India had united behind the Congress Party, but the new nation also housed a number of deep divisions. Although Hindus made up the majority of the population, India included large numbers of Christians, Buddhists, Muslims and Sikhs. The wide variety of languages and dialects spoken throughout the country created a major barrier when it came to developing a constitution to encompass all Indians. To cope with this diversity, Indians structured their government on a federal system with power divided between a strong, central government and smaller, local governments. The constitution abolished India’s untouchable caste and granted political rights to women. Nonetheless, it would be years before these laws changed India’s discriminatory attitudes.

Following the death of Gandhi, leadership of the Congress Party passed to Jawaharlal Nehru, India’s first prime minister. From 1947 to 1964, Nehru worked to turn India into a modern nation and to promote social justice. Following his death, his daughter, Indira Gandhi (not related to Mahatma Gandhi), and, later, his grandson, Rajiv Gandhi, served as prime ministers. Both were popular, skillful and energetic leaders but cracked down hard on protesters. For Indira and Rajiv Gandhi, this led to civil unrest and their assassinations.
In northwestern India, some Sikhs wanted the Punjab region to break away from India and to become an independent country. To call attention to their cause, they occupied the Golden Temple, a well-known landmark at Amritsar, in 1984. Prime Minister Indira Gandhi sent the Indian military to drive the Sikhs from the temple. Several months later, she was assassinated as part of Sikh separatist plot. In retaliation, thousands of Sikhs were killed in throughout India.

Although the Congress Party had remained in power almost continuously since 1947, the growth of Hindu nationalism came to the forefront in the 1990s. The nationalists argued that India’s Hindu religious traditions and culture had been undermined by the Congress Party, which had tried to separate religion and government. Following a campaign that promised a stronger military, the Hindu Nationalist Party gained control of Parliament. This further complicated relations with the Muslim state of Pakistan. Both countries emphasized their military strength by successfully testing nuclear weapons in 1998. By 2001, both nations had recruited massive armies and were poised for combat. Intense diplomatic negotiations convinced both sides to deescalate. Indian elections in 2005 produced a more moderate government. This led to the reopening of trade and business
between India and Pakistan. Militant groups on both sides of the border, however, still threaten the peace between the two countries.

Sri Lankan Soldier Following a Rebel Attack

The island nation of Sri Lanka, once known as Ceylon, also became a center of controversy. The majority of Sri Lankans were traditionally Buddhists who spoke Sinhalese. They often discriminated against the island’s Hindu minority that spoke Tamil. A militant group of Hindus, known as the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, organized and fought to become a separate state. As prime minister of India, Rajiv Gandhi, intervened and sent peacekeeping troops to calm the Tamil uprising. This effort failed to end the violence, and this same group of rebels engineered the assassination of Gandhi several months later.

STOP: Answer Section D Questions

The Challenge of an Increasing Population

Efforts to raise the standard of living in South Asia have been stifled by the growing populations of India and Bangladesh, which have tripled since 1947 and now total over one billion. India has successfully increased its agricultural output
but has not been able to outpace the demand for food. Overcrowded cities do not provide enough jobs to sustain their inhabitants, and city services are pressed to provide running water and proper sewage disposal.

The massive numbers of inhabitants place a serious drain on the economy of the region and increase the reliance on foreign oil. Some leaders, such as Indira Gandhi, attempted to enforce mandatory sterilization, but these types of measures have achieved only limited success. This is especially true of rural areas where children are still viewed as an economic resource since they provide labor and care for their elderly parents. Answers to the problems created by the surging population have been and continue to be elusive.

STOP: Answer Section E Questions
What Does It All Mean?

Differences among Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs and other religious factions had major political and economic repercussions throughout the Indian subcontinent. Territorial disputes stemming from religious controversies in areas like Kashmir continued to plague the region. At the same time, the development of nuclear weapons served to deepen distrust and to intensify the animosity. The governments of India, Pakistan and Bangladesh also have disagreed on how to cope with concerns over the ever-increasing population.

Along with China and India, Japan faced major changes in the post-World War II era. The Allies formally occupied the island nation. However, the United States exercised almost total authority over the Japanese people, who accepted this passively. When the occupation ended according to the terms of the treaty signed at the end of the war, Japan regained its independence and embarked on an amazing economic recovery.

Additional Resources and Activities

Main Points Worksheet

What Gandhi Can Teach Today’s Protesters (Article with Quiz)

The True Story of the Koh-I-Noor Diamond (Article with Quiz)