2. Hinduism became the main religion of the Guptas. (As already mentioned, Buddhism, which had become important under Asoka, died out in India.) Hinduism gave India a religious unity.

3. The Guptas believed they ruled as the choice of the gods (divine right). They believed they had absolute power to promote "the right way" (Dharma) as set up in the sacred books of Hinduism. The ideas of absolute rule lasted in India well into the 19th century.

4. The Guptas encouraged the setting up of village councils to rule local areas. The council was made up of five elders and was called the panchayat (pancha means "five"). Village life became the basis of the Indian economy and way of life. A headman, usually a wealthy peasant, was in charge and passed the position down to his descendants. This system, including the panchayat, still exists in India today (see page 382). Reliance on local government continued as the Indian people failed to unite into a true national state through the succeeding centuries.

5. The Guptas set up a system of land taxes. Payments were based on a percentage of the crops raised. Today, taxes in India are still collected as in Gupta times.

Destruction of the Gupta Empire

In the 6th century A.D. a series of nomadic tribes (Huns, Turks, and Mongols) invaded India and slowly destroyed the Gupta Empire. By the end of the 7th century, the Gupta Dynasty no longer existed. For the next five centuries there was no unity in India.

The Muslims in India

The Delhi Sultanate

From the 8th century on, the course of Indian history was influenced by the expansion of Islam. The conflict between Islam and Hinduism led to tensions in Indian life. The followers of the two religions were far apart on matters of belief and custom, and for centuries these differences caused many problems between the two groups.

These religious tensions had their origin not long after the Gupta Empire fell apart, when Muslims began to invade India. Their first expeditions were unsuccessful, but by 712, they had taken over the state of Sind. The Muslim kingdoms bordering India gained strength. Mahmud of Ghazni and Muhammed Ghoji led armies into India, and their successors set up the Delhi Sultanate. For several centuries most of northern and much of central India was controlled by the sultans. However, the sultans had a difficult time keeping order and resisting attacks from outside India. In the 13th and 14th centuries, the most notable attackers were the Mongols—Genghis Khan, Tamerlane, and Babur.

The Mogul Empire

In the early 16th century, Babur brought an end to the Delhi Sultanate, and a new and powerful Indian Empire was started. The new Muslim rulers set up the Mogul Empire. Akbar the Great, Babur's grandson, who was an excellent organizer and administrator,
established a firm basis for the empire. He included capable Hindus in the government and won their loyalty and cooperation. Also, he eliminated the head, or poll tax, placed on Hindus, thus gaining the cooperation of most of them. Although Akbar tried to combine the best teachings of Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism in a new religion, the Divine Faith, he failed in this effort.

Akbar's policies were followed by the next two rulers, but the last of the mighty Moguls, Aurangzeb, reversed some policies, an action that led to the disintegration of the empire. His biggest error was trying to enforce Islamic law and customs, thus driving the loyal Hindus away. Aurangzeb quarreled with the Sikhs and the Rajputs. He wasted wealth and energy in trying to conquer the Marathis, but was never successful.

The Mogul Empire did not end with Aurangzeb's death in 1707. His descendants remained on the throne in Delhi until 1857, but their kingdom shrank until it included only the area around the capital.

The Mogul rulers took pride not only in their political and military achievements, but also in cultural advances. Having great wealth, the Mogul kings were patrons of the arts. The new Mogul school of art became known especially for its portraits, pictures of animals, and use of color. The Moguls were also interested in the construction of beautiful buildings. The most famous building of this period is the Taj Mahal, designed by Emperor Shah Jahan as a tomb for his wife.

The Taj Mahal was built by the Mogul ruler Shah Jahan in the 17th century as a tomb for his wife.
The Moguls encouraged the use of the Persian language for both writing and speaking. Little by little, Persian was fused with Hindi, the language of North India. The result was the creation of a new language, Urdu.

**Fall of the Moguls**

The Moguls were never in control of all of India. The Rajputs, who are supposed to represent the Kashatriya, or warrior class, ruled most of northwest India. The Rajputs have always been proud of their fighting ability. All Rajput men became warriors since, according to one of their most important rules of conduct, they were never allowed to touch a plow. This rule kept all Rajputs from the most common way to earn a peaceful living—farming. The Rajputs successfully fought off the Moguls and deserve much of the credit for preserving Hinduism in northwest India.

Another people of the northwest who caused trouble for the Moguls were the Sikhs. The founder of the Sikh religion was Guru Nanak (1469–1539), who preached monotheism, the worship of one supreme being (god). He took the idea of monotheism from the Muslims of India. Although Nanak rejected the idol worship of Hinduism, he did not disagree with the main Hindu beliefs of Karma and rebirth. Therefore, the Sikhs, as Nanak’s followers came to be called, remained “reformed Hindus.”

After Nanak died, his work was carried on by gurus (teachers). Ram Das, the fourth guru, undertook to build the city of Amritsar, which became the pilgrimage and religious center of the Sikhs. It was here the Sikhs built the Golden Temple, their holiest shrine.

By the 17th century, the Sikhs were facing religious persecution from the Muslim rulers of the Mogul Dynasty. To protect themselves, the Sikhs set up a military brotherhood known as the Khalsa (pure). A member of the Khalsa changed his surname to “Singh” (lion).

For the next 300 years, however, the Sikh and Hindu communities lived together in peace and cooperation.

A third people who actively resisted the Moguls were the Marathis, who lived near the western Ghats. Under their great leader Sivaji, the Marathis successfully waged guerrilla warfare against the Moguls. They set up a strong state in central and western India.

After Aurangzeb’s death in 1707 one Mogul province after another followed the Maratha plan: they broke away and successfully established their own independence.

The ruler of Persia invaded India in 1739 and carried off the Mogul crown jewels and the famous gold and jeweled Peacock Throne.

Finally, in 1857, the British put an end to the Mogul Dynasty at the time of the Sepoy Rebellion (see page 400). The Moguls were the last independent Indian Dynasty.

**The British in India**

**European Trading Companies**

While Akbar ruled from 1556–1605, European ships began to call at Indian ports in increasing numbers. Portugal was the first nation to claim land in India. Vasco da Gama landed on the Malabar coast in 1498, and Portuguese settlements were established almost...
immediately on India’s west coast near Bombay. The Portuguese were followed by the Dutch, French, and British.

Trade was the main reason for the Europeans’ voyages. From India, the Europeans hoped to get cotton goods, spices, silk and indigo, a plant from which a blue dye is made. The Europeans set up trading companies in rented seaport areas off the mainland of India to handle their business. It was in this way, for example, that the British East India Company founded the cities of Madras, Calcutta, and Bombay.

The Growth of British Control

During the period of Mogul rule, these European companies became more and more involved in Indian affairs. This was especially true of the French and British East India Companies, whose involvement led to wars against each other in India. The rivalry between the French and the British in India was part of a larger clash of interests in Europe and America.

Led by Robert Clive, the British East India Company was victorious. At the Battle of Plassey, in 1757, Clive defeated the ruler of the state of Bengal. This victory, coming after an earlier British defeat of French troops in South India, gave the British control of much of India. The rajahs were unable to unite, and were thus defeated, one by one.

In the late 1700s, the British Parliament (supreme legislative body) decided that the British East India Company was not doing its job properly. The British government increased its own role in India, and began social, land, and tax reforms. Some of these reforms did not receive the approval of the Indian people.

The Sepoy Rebellion

The event that is most written about in Indian history is the uprising against British rule in 1857. Throughout the first half of the 19th century, Indian dissatisfaction with the rule of the British East India Company and with the reforms of the British Parliament grew.

1. In 1784, the India Act was passed by the British Parliament. This law limited the British East India Company to trading activities, the British government took charge of military and government actions. However, the company still had great power since it was allowed to keep its army and to raise money from the taxes it collected.

2. Lord Cornwallis, the first governor-general of India appointed by Parliament, made reforms in taxation and landholding. Under Cornwallis, local leaders were strictly controlled, and a civil service of government workers based on ability, not on class, was set up. Most higher level jobs, however, went to the British; only jobs on middle and lower levels were given to deserving Indians.

3. Education reforms were put into effect. The British model became the rule, with the result that traditional Indian education and customs were often ignored or destroyed.

4. Other British reforms also often meant the destruction of Indian practices if they violated British custom or law.

5. In 1829 the British maj (government) abolished suttee. Suttee was a traditional Indian practice in which a widow (often drugged at the time) was forced to commit suicide on her husband’s funeral pyre. The Indians were outraged by this destruction of a “sacred tradition,” even though it was a brutal practice that deprived the
woman of her rights. (In 1856, the British raj passed a law that allowed widows to remarry.)

6. The Muslims of the dying Mogul Empire resented their loss of power in government and the replacement of Persian with English as the language of government.

7. Local opposition in the villages also increased as the British East India Company began to interfere with Indian life and customs. Settlement of disputes passed from the village council (panchayat) to British officials and their Indian representatives. Their decisions often followed British custom and law, not local tradition. In addition, village taxes were raised to help implement these changes. Although new roads and ponds were built with part of the tax money, much of it went into the pockets of people outside the village.

8. Most disturbing was the custom of the British of setting themselves apart from the Indians as a new ruling class. The Indians resented the British attitude of superiority.

9. In 1855, Parliament passed an act requiring sepoys (Indian soldiers in British service) to serve in other areas of Asia. According to Hindu tradition, Kshatriya warriors could lose their caste position if they left the country.

Outbreak of the Rebellion

In May 1857, the British introduced the new Enfield rifle into the Indian army. To load the rifle, the sepoys had to bite off the tops of the greased cartridges. Rumor spread that the bullets were smeared with a mixture of beef and pork grease. Hindus hold cows sacred, and the Koran (Muslim holy book) forbids Muslims to eat pork.

Even though the bullets were removed from service, the episode became a symbol for all the Indian grievances against the British. The sepoys refused to load the rifles. Some sepoys were dismissed from the army; others were sent to jail. In response, the sepoys mutinied (rose in rebellion) against their officers.

On a Sunday morning in May 1857, three sepoys divisions near Delhi, the center of English power in North India, freed their fellow soldiers who had been jailed and moved toward the city. The rebellion spread rapidly across India. The sepoys captured many important cities, including Delhi Cawnpore (Kanpur) and Lucknow. The rebels proclaimed that a new Mogul Empire was to be set up.

By the summer of 1858, stronger and better equipped British forces, aided by loyal Indian troops (mainly Sikhs), defeated the rebels. Many innocent people both British and Indian, were massacred and both sides committed atrocities.

Aftermath of the Rebellion

The 1857 rebellion was a turning point in Indian history. The British called it the Indian Mutiny or the Great Mutiny of 1857. Many Indians, however, called it the First Indian War of Independence. To them it was the beginning of a militant Indian nationalism that sought to overthrow the power of the British raj. Later, Indian nationalists claimed that Indian nationalism could be traced to the events of the Sepoy Rebellion and its aftermath.

Bitterness and resentment lingered for many years on both sides. The immediate results of the Great Mutiny were changes in British government policies toward India. The British East India Company was abolished, and India was ruled by a viceroy appointed by the British government. In 1876, Queen Victoria was declared Empress of India, making the people of India subjects of the Queen and India part of the British Empire. Also the British government promised that it would no longer interfere with Indian religious beliefs or traditions unless they directly violated existing law.

The British began a policy of improving transportation and communication. Between 1850 and 1870, networks of roads and railroads were built. By 1870, India had the best
transportation infrastructure (basic framework) in Asia. The British also set up an efficient telegraph and postal system.

These improvements made Indians more aware of each other and of the rest of the world. Unintentionally the British were helping the Indian people to unite and to develop a strong national feeling.

Development of Indian National Feeling

After the Sepoy Rebellion, a new type of leader emerged in India to oppose the British. This leader was often educated in British universities, was familiar with the British tradition of political rights, and wanted to share in the governing of his own land. The India National Congress, founded in 1885, was set up to help achieve this goal. Most members did not call for independence, but for a share in a ruling India. Within the group, however, there were many different opinions about how to gain this goal. A small but vocal minority, led by Bal Tilak, called for any means to drive out the British, even revolution.

The Congress was also opposed by Muslims, who were suspicious of the motives of the Hindu-led Congress Party. In 1906, the Muslim League was set up under the leadership of Sayyid Ahmad Khan to protect Muslims from Hindu domination.

During and after World War I, the Indian nationalist movement began to change from a passive, patient movement to an aggressive, demanding one. The nationalists were disappointed by British rejection of their wartime request for more rights. As a whole, the Indian people were angered by the Rowlatt Acts, which restricted the rights of Indians, and by the Amritsar Massacre, in which unarmed Indians were killed by British troops. The British attempted to calm the Indians with the Montagu-Chelmsford reforms, giving Indians a larger share in their government, but the clamor for self-government never died.

It is important to remember, however, that, although the Indian people were united in their desire for independence, religious tensions between Hindus and Muslims continued to cause dissension and conflict.

American Influence on the Indian Independence Movement

A striking example of the close relationship between the American and Indian independence movements is to be found in the following excerpts from the U.S. Declaration of Independence and the pledge taken by members of the Indian National Congress on “Independence Day” (January 26, 1950):

AMERICAN DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE

We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness; that to secure these rights governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed; that whenever any form of government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the right of the people to alter it or abolish it.
NATIONAL CONGRESS PLEDGE

We believe that it is an unalienable right of the Indian people, as of any other people, to have freedom and enjoy the fruits of their toil and have the necessities of life, so that they may have full opportunities of growth. We believe also that if any government deprives a people of these rights and oppresses them, the people have a further right to alter it or to abolish it.

Mohandas K. Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru

The upsurge of nationalist feeling brought the Indians a new and great leader—Mohandas K. Gandhi. He made the nationalist movement a struggle against British rule. His goal for India was swaraj, self-rule free of all foreign control. To achieve this, Gandhi believed in ahimsa, the Indian idea of nonviolence. His program called for nonviolent noncooperation against the British. Gandhi is remembered in India both for his success in awakening the people to the need for self-government and for his humanitarian efforts.

The late 1920s and the 1930s were troubled years in India. A new group of leaders, including Jawaharlal Nehru, began to ask for independence. In 1935, the British Parliament passed the Government of India Act, which set up a partnership between India and the British government. However, this law was only partially successful in quieting the unrest.

Mohandas K. Gandhi (right) and his pupil and ally Jawaharlal Nehru.

Independence and Partition

The outbreak of war in Europe in 1939 brought about the final split between the British and the Indian Congress Party. Gandhi, Nehru, and their followers refused to support the British war effort unless their demands for independence were met. Also, the Muslim League, cooperating with the British, was committed to the setting up of a separate Muslim state.

At the end of World War II, the British government left its Indian Empire, having decided to partition the Indian subcontinent into two nations, Pakistan and India. On August 15, 1947, amid and followed by violence involving millions of deaths (including in 1948
the assassination of Gandhi) and great disorder, two new nations, one Hindu and the other Muslim, came into being. This division resulted from the failure of Hindu and Muslim leaders of India to solve their religious differences.

Views on the Partition into India and Pakistan

Both before and after the partition in 1947, various writers expressed their views on the Hindu-Muslim tensions that resulted in the division of India.

The differences which separate Hindu and Muslim are essentially religious.... Purely religious causes explain most of the communal disturbances of which we have record.... It may indeed be claimed with justice that [Hindus and Muslims] have been drawn together, not severed by their century and a half under a common administration, which has given them the same laws,...the same progressive civilization and the bond of a common speech.


This idea of a Muslim nation is the figment of a few imaginations only, and, but for the publicity given it by the press, few people would have heard of it. And, even if many people believe in it, it would still vanish at the touch of reality.


More than anything else, there has been no sense of a common history; instead there are two views of such historical happenings as are capable of creating any emotion.... The attitude of the Muslim community toward the idea of Pakistan was, therefore, the logical consequence of its history.


It is necessary first to realize that the Muslim community exists and that it is essentially different in texture and outlook from the Hindu community.


The Hindu-Muslim antagonism in its modern form has nothing to do with race, and very little to do with the tenets of religion.... The real basis is economic and social.


The true cause [of Hindu-Muslim tension] is the struggle for political power and for the opportunities which political power confers.


Lasting Effects of British Rule

Great Britain ruled India for almost 200 years. During that long period the British introduced many institutions and ideas that continue to have a great effect on India today.

1. The British set up an educational system in India that stressed Western culture, history, attitudes, and beliefs. Through this system, India’s leaders of today learned about Western ideals of freedom and liberty.