

The British East India Company

The East India Company had the unusual distinction of ruling an entire country. On December 31, 1600, a group of merchants who had incorporated themselves into the East India Company were given monopoly privileges on all trade with the East Indies. Gradually the British eclipsed the Portuguese and over the years they saw a massive expansion of their trading operations in India. Numerous trading posts were established along the east and west coasts of India, and English communities developed around India. The Company saw the rise of its fortunes, and its transformation from a trading venture to a ruling enterprise. The chief goal of the company was to make money and they did so at any cost. Before the British could gain control of India they had to eliminate rival countries. After that they used the treaties to gain access to all part of India. They were slowly becoming the rulers of India.

1. What was the East India Trading Company?

British Rule

British rule in India had positive and negative affects. Under British rule the East India trading company was making a lot of money. Along with that they did do some positive things to help India grow. The company worked to improve roads, and preserve peace. British officials also brought western education and legal procedures to India. The British also pressed for social change and tried to end the caste system. But not all things done by the British were positive; there were quite a few negatives as well. The British outlawed a Hindu ritual that allowed a widow to kill herself when her husband died. This was a scared ritual and the British no longer allowed it. They also banned other Hindu practices and the British also spent time trying to convert many Hindus and Muslims to Christianity. The British thought that Christianity was superior to the religions in India and the people of India did not appreciate this. Indian princes resented British rule and high taxes were angering many Indians. All of these problems could only lead to disaster.

1. List the negative affects of British rule.

2. List the positive affects of British rule.

The Sepoy Mutiny

The growing discontent with British rule erupted on May 10, 1857. The Sepoy, who were Indians trained by the British as soldiers, were issued new rifles by the British. The troops were asked to bite off the tips of the cartridges for the weapons but the cartridges for their new rifles were greased with lard and beef fat. Since the cow is sacred to Hindus, and the pig is abhorrent to Muslims, all the Sepoy were outraged and they

refused to do it. The Sepoy were dismissed without pay and sent home in disgrace. As a consequence many were shackled in chains and imprisoned. Incensed by this move, their comrades revolted and freed them. In their escape they viciously killed several British soldiers and this was to set the tone for some savage scenes, especially for the next six months.

Although initially the mutiny was spontaneous, it quickly became more organized and the Sepoy even took over the cities of Delhi and Kanpur. The British harshly crushed this mutiny. On September 20, 1857, the British recaptured Delhi, and in the following months, the British recaptured Kanpur and withstood a Sepoy siege of Lucknow. Massively reinforced from Britain, the armies, which spread out over the north of India, were vengeful and cruel, with a distinct taste for looting. In the early months of the British recovery, few Sepoys were left alive after their positions were overrun. The British soldiers made a decision not to take prisoners and most actions ended with a frenzied use of the bayonet. The British victories were accompanied by widespread revenge, and in many cases, unarmed Sepoy were killed, sown up in the carcasses of pigs or cows, or fired from cannons.

As a direct result of the Sepoy Mutiny, the Indian presence in the British army was reduced to almost a half of what it had been. Before the mutiny Indian regiments had been allowed to exist separately, they were now incorporated to be part of larger British regiments. The mutiny brought a bitter legacy of fear hatred and mistrust on both sides. Perhaps most importantly, the administration of India was passed to the British crown. After the mutiny had been quelled the British army acted as if it were in an occupied land.

1. Why did the Sepoy decide to start a mutiny?
2. What was the result of the mutiny?

An Account of the Opening of the Indian Mutiny at Meerut, 1857

Sunday, the 10th of May, dawned in peace and happiness. The early morning service, at the Church, saw many assembled together, some never to meet on earth again. The day passed in quiet happiness; no thought of danger disturbed the serenity of that happy home. We were on the point of going to the evening service, when the disturbance commenced on the Native Parade ground. Shots and volumes of smoke told of what was going on: our servants begged us not to show ourselves, and urged the necessity of closing our doors, as the mob were approaching. A man, after loading his arms, took me to the terrace on the top of the house; two of our countrywomen also took refuge with us to escape from the bullets of the rebels. Just at this moment, Mr. Gough, of the 3rd Cavalry, galloped full speed up to the house. He had dashed through the mutinous troops, fired at on all sides, to come and give us notice of the danger.

The increasing uproar, thickening smoke, and fires all around, convinced us of the necessity of making our position as safe as we could; our guard were drawn up below. After dark, a party of insurgents rushed into the grounds, drove off the guard, and broke into the house, and set it on fire. On all sides we could hear them smashing and plundering, and calling loudly for us; it seemed once or twice as though footsteps were on the staircase, but no one came up.

After some time, the flames got the ascendant, and the smoke became intolerable. Just as the fire threatened our destruction, we heard the voice of one of our servants calling to us to come down. At all risks, we descended. Our faithful servant, seeing our perilous situation amidst the increasing flames, and that every moment was precious, with his characteristic presence of mind and quickness, had suddenly thought of a plan by which to draw away the mob, who, after having satisfied themselves with all the plunder they could get, were every moment becoming more eager in their search for us. He boldly went up to them, won their confidence by declaring himself of their faith, and willing to give us up into their hands. He assured them it was useless to continue their search in the house; but if they would all follow him, he would lead them to a haystack, where we had been concealed.

The plan succeeded; and so convinced were they that what he had told them was the truth, that not a man remained behind. In this interval we got safely down. Not a human being was to be seen near the house; but we had only just time to escape into the garden when the mutinous crowd returned, madder than ever at the deception that had been practiced on them.

Never was dawn more welcome to us than on the 11th of May; the daylight showed how complete the work of destruction had been. All was turned into ruin and desolation, and our once bright happy home was now a blackened pile. Sad was the scene; but thankfulness for life left no place for other regrets.

We had been utterly cut off from all communication through the night, and sad was the tale of murder and bloodshed we now heard, and terrible the anxiety for those at Delhi, when it was found that the telegraph wires had been destroyed by the Sepoy, before any knowledge of what was occurring had transpired. The mutineers got away during the night, and pursuit was useless. The morrow confirmed our worst fears; but of that hideous massacre all has been made known. At length all was in readiness, and the order for the march was hailed with delight; sanguine were our hopes that a fortnight, or at the most three weeks, would see our gallant little army on its victorious return. With many and oft-repeated good wishes and prayers, we saw them depart. On the night of the 27th May they marched away.

1. What does this account say about the Sepoy Mutiny?