

# The History of the Twentieth Century

## Episode 217

### “The Unending Quest”

#### Transcript

[music: Fanfare]

*At the dawn of history India started on her unending quest, and trackless centuries are filled with her striving and the grandeur of her successes and her failures. Through good and ill fortune alike, she has never lost sight of that quest or forgotten the ideals which gave her strength... We are citizens of a great country...and we have to live up to that high standard...for no nation can be great whose people are narrow...*

Jawaharlal Nehru.

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

[music: Opening Theme]

Episode 217. The Unending Quest.

India is one of the oldest countries in the world. The early history of civilization in the Old World begins along four river courses. The world’s first civilization is believed to have developed in Mesopotamia. That’s actually the course of two rivers, the Tigris and the Euphrates. The word Mesopotamia is a Greek term that literally means “between the rivers.”

Mesopotamian civilization first emerged around 4000 BC, give or take. It depends on your definition of “civilization.” Civilization appeared in the Nile River valley a few centuries later. The next civilization emerged along the Indus River about a millennium after that. After a further millennium, civilization appeared along the Yellow River in China.

When I was young, we were taught that these four river valleys were the “cradles of civilization.” More recent thinking views this as too exclusive. Civilizations popped up in other places too; it didn’t simply spread outward from these beginnings. And of course there were New World civilizations that definitely arose independently. Did some of these early civilizations inspire others? Maybe. That’s a question in dispute.

Despite those qualifiers, the modern nations of Egypt, Iraq, India, and China can and do take a justified pride in being the world's oldest nations.

In the case of India, its civilization began along the banks of the Indus River, which is where India gets its name. In our time, the Indus River mostly flows through Pakistan, so arguably I should have begun today's episode by saying Pakistan is one of the world's oldest nations. But that isn't entirely fair. First of all, both the Indus River basin and the civilization to which it gave birth reach into what is India in our time. Second, the nations of Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh were all considered "India" before 1947 and they maintain a common culture, whatever their religious and political differences. So let me warn you right now and for the record that when I say "India" in this podcast, I mean to include Pakistan and Bangladesh, as was the usage in the early twentieth century. Sometimes it might include Myanmar and Sri Lanka, also.

India has its ancient and distinct culture because of its geography. Most of India is a large peninsula, jutting south into the Indian Ocean. To the north lie the Himalaya Mountains, the most formidable obstacle in the world. This means that land access to India has only been possible through Persian and Afghan lands to the west, or through the Southeast Asian lands to the east. Southeast Asia's role as the passageway between India and China is reflected in its other name, Indochina. The influence of both Indian and Chinese culture on Indochina is quite clear, and unsurprisingly, you find more Indian influence as you travel south and west through Indochina, and more Chinese influence as you travel east and north.

India is as large as Western Europe. Its size and its relative geographical isolation from the rest of Asia have led to it sometimes being referred to as a "subcontinent." Arguably Europe is a "subcontinent" of Asia also, but since Europeans get to pick the names, here is where we are.

Indian history from ancient times through the sixteenth century or so is similar to European history, in that the subcontinent was usually fragmented into a number of kingdoms, occasionally united, but that unity never lasted. But despite political fragmentation, Most Indians shared a number of common cultural values, even if they held to different national identities and religious beliefs. India is the birthplace of two well-known religions, Hinduism and Buddhism, and a few less well-known ones, like Jainism and Sikhism.

In ancient times, the people of India traded east with China and west with Persia. Indians brought Buddhism to East Asia, and it was adopted by many East Asian peoples, though Hinduism was and is the majority religion in India itself.

Alexander the Great conquered the Persian Empire and made it as far east as the Indus River, but though he had ambitions of conquering India, his soldiers had had quite enough of that and refused to travel any farther. Still, ancient Greece thus became aware of India and trade developed. This trade reached its height during the Roman Empire. The Empire's control of Egypt opened shipping lanes from the Red Sea to the west coast of India, though Roman ships struggled in the stormy weather of the Indian Ocean. India exported herbs, spices, indigo, sugar,

sesame oil, and especially cotton and silk textiles to the Romans. Rome sold India wine in return, though the Romans mostly paid for their exotic luxury imports from India with gold and silver. Archaeologists have found caches of Roman coins in many Indian sites, and also found an ivory statuette of the Hindu goddess Lakshmi in the ruins of Pompeii.

This trade declined when the Roman Empire did, though it continued until the Byzantines lost control of Egypt, first to the Persians, then to the Arabs. The Arabs had been trading with India since long before the advent of Islam, but once Arabia went Muslim, Arab sailors and traders traveling to India began bringing their religion with them. Mosques began to appear in India, and by the 10<sup>th</sup> century, India was home to a number of Islamic communities and a substantial Arab-Indian population.

India also experienced a number of invasions by Arabs and later other Muslim powers, some of which led to Muslim rule over parts of India, which led to more Indians becoming Muslims and the introduction of Arab technologies to India, notably the spinning wheel.

In 1526, a prince named Zahir ud-Din Muhammad, born in what is today Uzbekistan, conquered northern India from his base in Afghanistan. Because his name was hard to pronounce, he's generally known as Baber, which is Persian for tiger. His ancestry was Mongol; he counted both Genghis Khan and Tamerlane among his ancestors. This moment in history is usually where people draw the line and declare Baber's conquest the beginning of the Mughal Empire, Mughal being the Persian word for Mongol.

Baber's descendants would build on his conquests. His grandson, Akbar, expanded the Empire through a mix of military might and adroit diplomacy, co-opting the elites of other Indian kingdoms. His policy of religious tolerance and cultural pluralism made it easier for Indians to accept the rule of a Muslim Mongol-Persian empire. The Empire continued to expand in wealth and influence under Akbar's grandson, Shah Jahan, who is probably best known in the West for ordering the construction of the Taj Mahal as a mausoleum for his favorite wife. The Taj Mahal is notable for its exquisite combination of Indian and Muslim architecture; you can take it as a symbol of the blend of cultures that made up the Mughal Empire.

One of Shah Jahan's younger sons, Aurangzeb, seized control of the Empire from his father in 1658 and reigned over it until 1707. By this time the Mughal Empire controlled the entire subcontinent. United under Mughal rule, the India of this era was a wealthy and advanced nation. The Empire built roads and irrigation projects, regulated trade and currency, and India prospered. The GDP of India at this time is estimated to have been 24% of the world GDP, making India the world's largest economy of the time, larger even than that of China and substantially larger than all of Europe.

The key to India's wealth was textiles, and textile manufacturing was the cornerstone of the Indian economy. We're speaking here of artisanal manufacturing of cloth from spinning wheels and hand looms, since steam power and the Industrial Revolution have not yet come to India, or

anywhere else, for that matter. Silks from Bengal represented one part of this industry, although the silk trade was held back by Islamic disapproval, since the wearing of silks or gold jewelry by Muslim men is generally forbidden. Even so, more than a few wealthy Mughal men of the era succumbed to the temptation.

But India was best known for its cotton textiles. For five thousand years, ever since agriculture began in India, Indian farmers have been cultivating cotton. The Mughal Empire produced a variety of quality cotton fabrics that were prized everywhere and were India's most important export.

And here is pretty much where things stood when the Europeans turned up.

[music: Mouret, *Suite of Symphonies for brass, strings, and tympani, No. 1*]

Direct trade between Europe and India ended when Byzantine control over Egypt did. Egypt also produces cotton, by the way, but once the Arabs ruled Egypt, cotton became an Arab commodity. The Arabs continued to trade with India, so they still had access to those fabulous Indian fabrics, and they were willing to sell Egyptian cotton and resell Indian fabrics to Europeans...at a reasonable markup to cover reasonable expenses...

This markup was partly a function of how friendly relations were between the Muslim Arabs and the Christian Europeans. Since those relations were often not so friendly, the markup was often stiff. It got even stiffer when the Ottoman Turks became the principal power in the Near East, which led to Europeans searching for alternate trade routes to Asia by the late 15<sup>th</sup> century.

Cotton is also native to the New World, and the indigenous peoples of the American tropics were cultivating cotton and spinning and weaving it into textiles by the time Christopher Columbus happened upon the West Indies in 1492. Some have suggested that the cotton garments worn by the natives he met there help explain Columbus' conviction that he had actually reached the East Indies.

The Portuguese had better luck at reaching Asia by traveling east around Africa. The Portuguese sailor who first explored this route was Vasco da Gama, as you already know. Da Gama discovered Cape Agulhas, the southernmost tip of Africa, in December 1497, then proceeded into the Indian Ocean, where he made enemies of the Arab traders by raiding their ships, then proceeded to the city of Kozhikode, or Calicut, as it is known in English, and this is a different city from Calcutta, by the way. There da Gama and his crew were warmly welcomed by the King of Calicut, but relations turned chilly when da Gama explained that they came seeking spices and offered gifts from the King of Portugal: four woolen cloaks, seven brass vessels, two barrels of olive oil, a cask of honey, and some other assorted trinkets. The King's courtiers received these gifts while muttering to one another in Malayalam, the local language, words that roughly translate to this: "What the hell is this crap?" They inquired as to why the Portuguese weren't offering gold and silver in exchange for their spices; that's what the Arab traders always did.

Meanwhile, Arab traders in Calicut, who had heard the stories of da Gama's attacks on unarmed Arab trading ships along the African coast, passed the news along to the King with the suggestion that this da Gama character was nothing but a pirate and his stories of representing some European king were probably so much snake oil.

And thus ended the first direct contact between Europeans and Indians in nearly a millennium, with the Europeans given a humiliating brush-off. I tell you this story because it is representative of the problems Europeans faced in trading with India. And also with China, for that matter. The trade goods Europeans had to offer were no better, and often not as good as, what Indians could obtain from domestic sources. The only commodities Europeans had that interested Asians were precious metals: gold and silver.

Now, people at this time had very little understanding of what we today call economics. But you don't have to be Paul Krugman to figure out that steadily shipping gold and silver—commodities that are finite in supply—to India in exchange for consumable goods like cloth and spices that get worn out and eaten up and need to be replaced will eventually lead to a situation in which India will have all the gold and silver while still able to produce plenty of cloth and spices, while Europe is going to have...nothing at all. In fact, no less a figure than the Roman author Pliny the Elder fretted about this very problem all the way back in the first century.

So what is the solution to the problem facing Europeans who want to trade with India? The story of Vasco da Gama not only epitomizes the problem, but gives us a hint of the answer. The Portuguese arranged a trading post at Calicut, but the trading post got into a squabble with the local Arab merchant guild which led to an Arab attack on the trading post and the deaths of dozens of Portuguese. Enter Vasco da Gama, who returned to India at the head of a punitive expedition that seized Calicut merchant vessels and cut off the hands, ears, and noses of the sailors aboard them and then bombarded the city with cannon. The Portuguese seized an Arab ship carrying pilgrims to Mecca, looted it, then burned the ship with the passengers locked below decks, killing hundreds, including women and children.

The moral of the story is, if you can't negotiate, you can always fall back on war crimes to get what you want. Or, to put it in the language that will be used in history books published in the West for centuries to come: "European explorers opened the Orient to trade."

Vasco da Gama would provide the template for the next 400 years of Euro-Asian relations. The Portuguese would be followed by the English, the Dutch, the Danish, the Swedish, and eventually even the French.

English interest in India began after the defeat of the Spanish Armada. As you know from episode 128, at that time Spain and Portugal were in a dynastic union under the Spanish Habsburgs, meaning that England was at war with both countries, while the Spanish were enjoying a good share of the trade with India. On August 3, 1592, an English squadron overseen by Sir Walter Raleigh, patrolling the Azores in the hope of capturing Spanish ships returning

from the Americas happened upon a Portuguese ship called *Madre de Deus* on its way home from India. Since England was also at war with Portugal, the English attacked and captured this ship and brought it home to the port of Dartmouth.

*Madre de Deus* proved to be the most valuable prize ever captured in the history of naval warfare. The ship was huge by the standards of the time, and it was crammed with nearly a thousand tons of the most valuable cargo imaginable, including gold, silver, and jewelry, but that was only the beginning. Dyes. Perfumes. Ebony. Fine textiles and tapestries. And hundreds of tons of highly desirable spices only available in the East Indies: Black pepper. Cloves. Mace. Cinnamon. Nutmeg.

Now I'm getting hungry.

The total value of this cargo is estimated at half a million pounds, which at the time was roughly the revenue the English Crown collected in a full year. Not that Queen Elizabeth ever saw most of that loot. There was a feeding frenzy in Dartmouth when the ship was tied up and more than half the cargo was stolen before Sir Walter could summon enough soldiers to guard the vessel properly.

Never mind. Also aboard the ship was a rutter, that is a set of sailing instructions for how to get to India. Understand that navigating halfway around the world in the sailing ships of this era was a lot more complicated than just "sail south along the African coast until you get to Cape Agulhas, then hang a left." Sailors needed to know about things like prevailing winds and ocean currents. It also helped to know which ports in the East sold what kinds of goods and at what kinds of prices. For a hundred years, the Portuguese had zealously guarded the secrets of navigating to India. Now, they were in the hands of the English.

*Madre de Deus* had whetted the English appetite for the treasures of India, and the English set to work at once to get more. The first few expeditions were lost at sea. Then in 1599, a group of wealthy Englishmen pooled their investment money into a project to exploit the wealth of the East. They secured a Royal Charter from Queen Elizabeth and formed "The Company of Merchants of London Trading with the East Indies." And yes, this is the forerunner of what will become the English, and later the British, East India Company. It was known by different names at different times, and sometimes there was more than one of them, but I'm not going to trouble you with those details. We'll just call it the British East India Company from now on.

The British East India Company is an early example of a corporation. Perhaps in our time we would say a mega-corporation or a multi-national corporation. Back in the days of Queen Elizabeth, you needed specific approval from the Sovereign to form a corporation. The special rights and privileges that come with the corporate form were deemed too valuable and too easily abused to hand out to just anyone willy-nilly, the way we do it today. The East India Company is a good example of why you might be leery of giving out corporate charters like they're candy at

Halloween, but fortunately in our modern world, though we have many huge and powerful multinational corporations, none of them ever does anything bad, so no worries.

But it wasn't just that the East India Company enjoyed the benefits of corporate status; it also held a royally granted monopoly, initially over all trade in the Indian and Pacific Oceans. That's as far as the English Crown was concerned. There were still the Portuguese. There were also the Dutch, who formed their own Dutch East India Company. That was after the British, but they got a leg up on the spice trade, which was initially what the English were most interested in: the Spice Islands, part of what we today call Indonesia.

The English signed a treaty with the Mughal Emperor in 1612 that permitted them to establish their own trading posts in India. Later, Portugal shook off Spanish rule and regained its full independence, which required it to rebuild its alliance with England. The King of Portugal married off his daughter to Charles II, who shrewdly requested the Portuguese concession at Bombay as his dowry. Portuguese influence in India gradually dwindled down to the region of Goa, though the Portuguese will hold onto that enclave on the western Indian coast for another 300 years, until ousted by the armed forces of an independent India in 1961.

The Dutch, meanwhile, did a pretty good job of driving the Portuguese out of the Spice Islands; this left England and the Netherlands to duke it out between themselves in a series of wars largely over the wealth of the Indies. The Glorious Revolution of 1688 put a Dutch prince, William of Orange, on the English throne. This ended the conflict between England and the Netherlands, but it led to a decline in Dutch trade, in part because many Dutch trading and banking concerns moved their operations to London and became British. The British and the Dutch eventually settled into an arrangement which ceded the Spice Island trade to the Netherlands and trade in India, which by now was becoming more lucrative, to the British.

This brings us back around to the early 18<sup>th</sup> century and the reign of the Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb. The British East India Company mostly concerned itself with trade over this time and did its best to stay on good terms with the Emperor. When an English pirate attacked an Indian ship carrying Muslim pilgrims returning from Mecca and stole some £60,000 worth of the passengers' property, the East India Company had to pay compensation for the victims' losses, while company representatives prostrated themselves before the Mughal Emperor to beg his forgiveness.

That was the way of things in 1695. But the way of doing things was about to change.

[music: "Mumbai Meditation"]

One could envision an alternate history of the Mughal Empire, one that parallels the Qing Empire in China. In this alternate history, India retains its sovereignty, even if the Europeans gradually penetrate the economy, then grant large loans to the imperial government, then demand special concessions in return, then take control over revenue collection and insert "advisors" into

the imperial court, then...and so on until you get to the twentieth century, when the Empire is dominated by European powers but still largely independent.

But that is not how Mughal history played out. In fact, the reign of Aurangzeb represents a high point in the history of the Empire, with a rapid decline after his death in 1707. Why? The Mughals, like the Qing, were a minority ruling class that governed a huge empire populated by people not of their own ethnic group. But the Mughals, unlike the Qing, were a different religion from the majority of Indians. And India is an empire composed of regions that speak different languages and hold different ethnic identities, unlike China, where 90% of the empire's subjects identify as Han.

And then there's Aurangzeb himself. His legacy is controversial in India, even today. (Everything is controversial in India.) But at least some of the blame for the disintegration of the Empire has to be laid at his feet. He was a far stricter Muslim than his predecessors and more willing to impose sharia on India. He enforced the *jizya*, the tax on nonbelievers that previous emperors never bothered with. He raised taxes on Hindu merchants and lowered them on Muslim merchants. And he ordered the destruction of Hindu temples. In his defense, at least some of this was because the temples were hosting political opposition groups, but still. In India, these sorts of actions are highly controversial and likely to blow up in your face. The American historian Will Durant summarizes the Emperor's religious policies this way: "Aurangzeb converted a handful of timid Hindus to Islam, but he wrecked his dynasty and his country."

That may be laying it on a little thick. Still, when he died in 1707, his Empire began to unravel. Hindu *rajyas*, nominally subordinate to the Emperor, asserted their privileges. Imperial revenues declined, and the economy followed. Into this power vacuum stepped the British. Or to put it more precisely, into this power vacuum stepped the British East India Company.

The East India Company was large and wealthy, powerful in India and with powerful friends in Westminster. It controlled a large share of the foreign trade of both India and the United Kingdom and it was immensely profitable, not least because it got preferential tax treatment. In this context, I'll note that the famous Boston Tea Party protest in Massachusetts in 1773 was a protest against favored tax treatment for the East India Company. That tea came from China, not India, which serves to remind us that the East India Company's monopoly was not only on trade from India, but from all of Asia.

But in India, the Company had more than just a huge trade monopoly guaranteed by both the British Crown and the Mughal Emperor. It also had its own army. This force began as a few hundred armed guards to protect British trading posts. The guards were native Indians hired by the Company; they served under British commanders. And here is the template for the future British Indian Army. There were only a few hundred of them at first, but they were armed with European weapons and trained in European tactics, which made them, soldier for soldier, the most formidable fighting force in India. The Emperor's authority was diminishing in general, but



the Emperor's authority to grant favors to the East India Company was backed up by the Company's own private army. You can see how this would lead to the Emperor gradually becoming the Company's figurehead.

The Company could also do deals with the subordinate rulers, the Hindu rajas and the Muslim nawabs, using its wealth as its carrot and its army as its stick. But the East India Company had one rival: the French, who, based in Pondicherry, had their own trade interests to look after.

In 1750, the East India Company had some 3,000 Indian soldiers, known as sepoys, under its command. This number expanded rapidly as competition with the French heated up. The British and the French agreed not to use their leverage over the Indians against each other, but both sides violated that agreement.

This rivalry reached the boiling point in 1757. Britain and France were in conflict across the globe in what is known in Europe as the Seven Years' War, and in the United States as the French and Indian War. The two nations were in conflict in Africa and India as well, making this the first war to take place on four continents. Some argue we should call it the first world war. In India, the French persuaded the Nawab of Bengal to attack the British in Calcutta, which along with Bombay and Madras was one of the three principal centers of Company power. The Nawab's forces took control of Calcutta and imprisoned a large number of British and Indian prisoners in a very small cell, where most of them died of suffocation and heat exhaustion. This is the "Black Hole of Calcutta" you may have heard of.

The forces of the British East India Company retook Calcutta after the Battle of Plassey on June 23, 1757, against the army of the Nawab of Bengal, supported by a small artillery force from the French East India Company. The British only had about 3,000 soldiers under their command against the Nawab's 50,000, but superior British arms prevailed. Also, too, the British bribed the Nawab's top military commander to defect, and he brought with him a substantial part of the Bengal Army.

The British thus won the battle, and eventually won the war, in India and globally. In India, it led to a sharp limiting of French privileges and a now-undisputed Company hegemony over virtually the entire country.

For the next century, until 1857, the highest authority in India would be not the Emperor, not even the British Crown, but a privately-held stock corporation that operated out of a stuffy set of offices in London, loosely overseen by the Crown and Parliament, responsible only to its stockholders, and to the people of India it owed nothing, not even in principle. This was and is a circumstance without parallel in world history.

The histories and the economies of India and the United Kingdom are now thoroughly intertwined, and will remain so for the next 200 years. We'll continue to examine this relationship next week, but we'll have to stop here for today.

I thank you for listening, and I'd especially like to thank Richard for making a donation, and thank you to Kalin for becoming a patron of the podcast. Donors and patrons like Richard and Kalin help cover the costs of making this show, which in turn keeps the podcast available free for everyone, so my thanks to both of them and to everyone who has pitched in and helped out. If you'd like to become a patron or make a donation, just visit the website, [historyofthetwentiethcentury.com](http://historyofthetwentiethcentury.com) and click on the PayPal or Patreon buttons.

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And I hope you'll join me next week, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*, as we continue our survey of Indian history, as India revolts against Company rule and comes under direct rule of the British Crown. Queen Victoria pledges to treat her Indian subjects no differently from her other subjects. Does she keep that promise? Find out next week, here, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

Oh, and one more thing. The longstanding connection between the UK and India inevitably led to a number of words from Hindi and other Indian languages becoming incorporated into English.

Some of these words are for concepts and things foreign to English speakers, words like *raja* and *nabob*, which is the Anglicized form of *nawab*, and *mogul*, which comes from *Mughal*. There are words like *pariah* and *pagoda*, *mongoose* and *cheetah*, *guru* and *pundit*, *jungle* and *typhoon*, *veranda* and *bungalow*, *teak* and *bamboo*.

There's also a plethora of food words, including *naan*, *roti*, *jackfruit*, *curry*, *mango*, *mulligatawny*, *chutney*, *ginger*, and even *candy* and *orange*. And there's a whole other set of words that reflect India's notoriety as a producer of fabrics and textiles: *calico*, *cot*, *bandana*, *pajama*, *dungaree*, *jodhpurs*, *khaki*, *cummerbund*.

We'll probe the economic relationship between India and Britain more closely in the next couple of episodes, but I can't help but note for now that the word *loot* is also of Indian origin. In our time, this word means the rewards you get after defeating the boss in a video game, but it used to mean plunder. How appropriate that even the word itself was looted from India.

[music: Closing Theme]