

The History of the Twentieth Century
Episode 218
“By Themselves Are Nations Made”
Transcript

[music: Fanfare]

*Are ye Serfs or are ye Freeman,
Ye that grovel in the shade?
In your own hands rest the issues!
By themselves are nations made!*

*Sons of Ind, be up and doing,
Let your course by none be stayed;
Lo! the Dawn is in the East;
By themselves are nations made!*

Allan Octavian Hume, *The Old Man's Hope*.

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

[music: Opening Theme]

Episode 218. By Themselves Are Nations Made.

Last time, we began our dive into Indian history, with the goal of understanding the India of the early twentieth century and its relationship to the United Kingdom. We got as far as the year 1757. That was when the British East India Company secured its primacy over India, a primacy that would last for a century.

Most histories draw the line at 1757, because that was the year of the Battle of Plassey, which we covered last week. The British went on to win the Seven Years' War against France and sharply restrict the activities of the French in India. Recall that the British won the Battle of Plassey in part because of the defection of the Nawab's chief military commander, a man named Mir Jafar Ali Khan. Following the defeat of Bengal, the British executed the Nawab and handed over his crown to Jafar.

But as far as the East India Company was concerned, Jafar's support in the battle was just a down payment on what he owed them for making him the new nawab. Bengal was forced to pay over ₹17 million in compensation to the East India Company, and millions more was demanded in personal gifts to high-ranking company officials. The short word for this kind of thing is "bribes." It only took a couple of years for Jafar to figure out that the British appetite for silver was bottomless, so he tried to do a deal with the Dutch to get out from under the British thumb. That didn't work out very well for the Dutch or for Jafar, who was himself deposed in favor of his son-in-law. Five years later, the son-in-law, Qasim, joined forces with the Nawab of Awadh and the Mughal Emperor in yet another attempt to rein in the East India Company. That also failed.

Company authority in India grew. It assumed the role of revenue collection in Bengal, then the whole of the Bengal state. Soon the East India Company had direct control of large areas of India, gradually expanding outward from its key footholds in the port cities of Calcutta, Bombay, and Madras.

Apart from outright annexation, the Company also extended its control over India by treaty agreements with local Indian rulers, the rajas and nawabs. The British called these the "Princely States." There were over 500 of them, ranging from large and powerful states like Jaipur to small principalities that were just a few square miles in size. The rulers of these Princely States would retain their titles and authority within the borders of their lands and be treated by the British with royal honors; in exchange, they gave up control of their realms' defense, trade, and foreign relations. The East India Company also imposed upon the Princely States the so-called "doctrine of lapse," meaning that if a ruler died without a male heir or became incompetent, the Company would take control of the realm, even though this was contrary to longstanding practice. Also, the Company got to decide if and when a ruler became incompetent.

Even in Britain, some looked askance at the conduct of the Company in India. Parliament couldn't help but notice that all the high-ranking Company officials, the so-called "nabobs," returned from India with immense personal fortunes, even as the East India Company itself perpetually posted losses and kept asking for bailouts from the Treasury. In the early 1770s a terrible famine struck Company-ruled Bengal, the result of a failed monsoon and exacerbated by Company mismanagement. Some ten million people died, a tragedy so grave it even attracted the attention of Parliament.

Over the decades that followed, Parliament gradually imposed a few modest reforms, such as affirming that the Company might control its holdings in India, but the King was the ultimate sovereign. The Company gradually lost its monopolies over trade in India and later China, as competing mercantile interests in the City of London pointed out that the Company monopoly had been created when its competitors were the Portuguese and the Dutch, not other British concerns. Those other British concerns, as well as British missionaries and British subjects in general were finally granted access to India under the Crown's protection. By the mid-19th

century, the East India Company was less a business and more the agent for the British government's rule over India.

These various reforms were made for the benefit of British interests, certainly not Indian ones. They were meant to make the extraction of wealth from India more efficient, and this would be characteristic of British rule over India. The East India Company ruled through its wealth. The arms and might of the Company were hired Indian soldiers, called *sepoys*, which comes from the Persian word for cavalry, although sepoys were in fact infantry. You might be wondering why Indians would be so willing to serve as the military might behind a European takeover of their own country. But there was no pan-Indian nationalism at this time. India is a large region, more comparable to Europe as a whole than to one European country. People from different parts of India speak different languages, sometimes practice different faiths and different customs. A soldier born and raised in Mysore had no qualms about enforcing British rule over the people of Sind.

For in India, that had always been the way princes and potentates imposed their will. The British were hardly the first foreign power to conquer India; the Mughals themselves had done the same, and the Mughals too had enforced their will with native Indian soldiers. You can call it “divide and rule” if you like, although an Indian of the 18th or early 19th century would not have seen it that way. They might have said that the Mughals had not divided India; India was by its nature a divided land.

But past conquerors, like the Mughals, had also settled in and ruled from among the people of India. They had embraced Indian ways and viewed India's prosperity as prerequisite to their own. Taxes they collected from Indian people were spent in India. British rule was different. The British did not settle India. They ruled by remote control, as it were. British administrators came and went, and while some of them absorbed some Indian values and attitudes during their stay, few of them lived out their whole lives in India, and they remained British at heart. In their view, British prosperity was in no way dependent upon India's; the British were more likely to reverse that calculation and say that India's prosperity was dependent upon Britain's.

And these were the people who were in charge of the government in British India. They were all British. Their first loyalty was to Britain, and they saw nothing wrong in that, even though their salaries were paid by Indian taxpayers.

The Napoleonic wars distracted Britain for a time, but by the second quarter of the 19th century, India was again a major political topic. One of the reforms that Parliament had imposed on the East India Company was free access by British missionaries to Company-controlled regions of India. These missionaries found aspects of the Indian way of life disagreeable and began pressuring for social reforms in India. This was a new development. The Company had never cared about anything but profits and losses.

One particular Hindu practice that aroused missionary ire was the custom of *sati*, by which Hindu widows sacrificed their own lives in the funeral pyres of their deceased husbands. This was in principle a voluntary act, understood as an expression of the widow's grief, although there were cases reported in which widows were forced into *sati* by in-laws who apparently thought these widows weren't grieving enough and needed a little encouragement. There were also accusations of forced *sati* by family members who drove the widow into the flames because they stood to gain substantial inheritances, once she was out of the way.

It was these extreme cases that attracted most of the attention, though they were relatively uncommon. Still, you have to ask whether any widow "voluntarily" chooses suicide after a lifetime of living in a culture that holds up *sati* as proper and admirable, and you should also note that even among Indian Hindus there were reformers who wanted to see the practice ended. The British cracked down on *sati* and on other customs they found objectionable, such as the prohibition on widows remarrying, the disinheriting by Hindu families of Christian converts, female infanticide, and legal codes under which criminal penalties varied depending upon the caste of the perpetrator.

Ha! Aren't you glad that we don't have anything like that in Western legal systems?

Many of these reforms were defensible, even laudable, and had support within India. But they also drove home to Indians that the British were different and alien, and how, in contrast with rulers of times past, the British would not be changed by India; rather, they meant to change India into something more British. As the missionary presence grew, and as the Company's doctrine of lapse gradually increased the share of India falling under Company control and thus opening to missionaries, even Karl Marx opined that in the long run, the British were likely to remake India in their own image.

And this brings us to the fateful year of 1857.

[music: Indian instrumental music]

The year 1857 marked the hundredth anniversary of the Battle of Plassey. It also became another watershed moment in Indian history: the Great Rebellion.

What caused the Great Rebellion? The British liked to point to the reforms I just talked about, like the abolition of *sati*. Probably not the main cause, though maybe a contributing factor. Indians certainly resented the special legal privileges British in India enjoyed, even as the British were abolishing special legal privileges for Indian elites. The broadening of the reach and the tightening of the grip of the Company was certainly a factor, as was the taxation and economic exploitation it imposed on the lands it ruled.

But the proximate cause was a rifle cartridge.

The British had introduced a new design of muzzle-loading rifle into the Indian Army. Its ammunition came in a paper cartridge, and soldiers were expected to tear the cartridge open with their teeth before stuffing it into the barrels of their weapons. These paper cartridges were greased, to protect the powder inside from moisture, and after they had been in use for a time, rumors began to fly that the grease had been rendered from the fat of cows and pigs.

Now, I haven't been able to find a source that will state definitively whether or not these rumors were true, which I take to mean that they were, since the British, who manufactured the cartridges, would have had every reason in the world to offer proof that the rumors were wrong and never did, but either way, this is certainly what the sepoys believed. Putting pig fat into the mouth was offensive to Muslims; putting beef fat into the mouth was offensive to Hindus, especially among the sepoys, many of whom were from high-caste Hindu families and stood to lose that status if the stories were in fact true.

It wasn't just about the cartridges, though. They were a symbol, a metaphor for British disregard of Indian cultural values and disrespect for Indian faiths. That and the missionaries and the doctrine of lapse had brought India to a simmer. Now the cauldron was about to boil over. Unrest among the soldiers led to harsh discipline from the British officers which in turn led to open rebellion. Sepoys mutinied, attacked their officers, and marched on Delhi, where the figurehead Mughal Emperor endorsed the rebellion—yes, there was still officially a Mughal Emperor.

I'm not going to get into a detailed retelling of the Rebellion—that's going a little far off topic, even for me—but in summary, I'll just say it was ugly. Thousands of British officers and civilians, including women and children, were captured by the rebels and many of them were slaughtered. Bad as it was, press accounts in Britain exaggerated the crimes of the rebels and told lurid stories of British women raped by Indians, stories that appear to have no basis in fact.

The active phase of the Rebellion lasted about six months, with an additional year to pacify unrest in the countryside. The British had to ship in soldiers from Europe, and were aided by the rulers and armies of many of the Princely States, which remained loyal. British soldiers, outraged by the press accounts of sepoy atrocities, reciprocated with atrocities of their own. Looting and rape were widespread, as were murders of civilians. Many British units had a "take no prisoners" policy. Many of the prisoners who were taken were promptly executed.

The Great Rebellion of 1857 was not a full-on revolution. It was spontaneous, and too haphazard to be called that. The rebels had no overarching ideal or goal, other than opposition to the British. Even at that, they had come closer to breaking British control over India than anyone in London was comfortable with. Reform was called for, and in 1858 the British government deposed the Mughal Emperor, dissolved the East India Company, and took control of India for itself. For the next ninety years, India would be ruled directly by the British government, through the Secretary of State for India and the Governor General, a period known as the British Raj.

With the new direct rule, the British tried to smooth over some of the conflicts that had led to the Rebellion. The British would back off on their attempts to change Indian culture. Indian military units that had proved unreliable were disbanded, and the British recruited new soldiers from populations deemed more loyal, notably the Sikhs and the Gurkhas. British officers were encouraged to build closer relationships with the Indian soldiers under their command, to learn more about Indian culture and show greater respect for Indian ways. The Princely States, whose support may have saved British rule in India, were rewarded, and they were given new and more generous treaty arrangements with the British Crown. You'll recall that this is how Queen Victoria was able to claim the title Empress of India.

The British would replace the East India Company with an Indian Civil Service that at least in theory would be open to native Indians, though in practice these highly paid and desirable positions were held almost exclusively by white Britons until the 1920s. These British administrators, many of whom studied classics at Cambridge or Oxford, consciously patterned British rule in India after the Roman Empire: so long as the natives obeyed British law and paid British taxes, they could live their lives as they pleased. No further meddling in Indian culture.

India would be governed the British way, with *British* defined not as a nation or a culture, but as an ideal: Stern, but honest and fair minded. It's remarkable how few British there actually were in India. During the entire period of British rule, from 1757 to 1947, the British presence in India—civil administrators, police, and soldiers—never amounted to more than 0.05% of the population. Surely never in the field of human governance were so many ruled by so few.

A more aloof attitude toward Indian cultural practices also translated into an aloof relationship with the Indian people. British administrators did not mingle. They lived in their own bungalows in their own cantonments—their word—and socialized among themselves. The only Indians they interacted with on a regular basis were their servants. The British set up a system of public education in India, though it was locally funded and therefore pretty basic, while they sent their own children to boarding schools back home. Romantic relationships between Britons and Indians were virtually unheard of, and the rare children of Indian-British marriages found themselves not accepted in either community. The British became essentially a new caste, occupying the top tier in a society already governed by caste distinctions.

If cultural meddling was now off the agenda, the British administration could and did still aim to modernize the Indian economy. As we've seen before in this podcast in the case of Africa, episodes 189 and 190, that was understood to mean integrating India into the burgeoning world economy, which in turn meant that India would export raw materials to the industrialized world in exchange for manufactured goods. This meant shifting Indian agriculture away from subsistence farming and toward export crops. It meant building railroads so that farmers growing and selling these crops would no longer be limited to the local market. Now, the whole world would be their marketplace.

Britain in the 19th century was the land of liberalism, of free trade, low tariffs, and *laissez-faire*. The British governed India in this spirit. Indeed, more so. Even in the days of the East India Company, which counted James Mill and later his son, John Stuart Mill, among its employees, Britons developed and encouraged a free-market economy in India, freer in fact than the one that existed in Britain. India would be the crucible in which the most modern of economic formulas would be tested.

All of this looks great on paper. In practice, over the second half of the nineteenth century, per capita income in India plunged, and about thirty million Indians starved to death.

[music: Indian instrumental music]

The period from 1858, when the British government took direct control over India, to 1901, the beginning of the twentieth century, was the darkest era in Indian history. Indeed, the widespread starvation and epidemics that killed so many combined with the collapse of personal income for most ordinary Indians has to stand as one of the greatest disasters in world history, and this disaster was not an act of nature or the consequence of a terrible war, but simply of misrule.

The British weren't *trying* to ruin India, but a combination of too much confidence in British ideas and values, particularly modernization and free trade, along with a lack of understanding and, it must be said, a lack of empathy with the people of India left India's British rulers blind to the consequences of their own errors.

I need to say this again: any reasonably democratic or responsive native Indian government would never have let India's troubles get this extreme, for the sake of its own survival, if nothing else. Fundamentally, the problem is that this Indian government does not have to answer to the Indian people. It has to answer to Parliament and to the special interests that lobbied Parliament, meaning that government policymakers in India always had one eye on what was good for British business. It was said that the Manchester Chamber of Commerce had more sway over Indian government policy than anyone in India had.

The role that India and China had in supporting British power and the world economy during the Belle Époque period is an interesting and under-discussed aspect of the history of this era, but I think it is key to understanding both British power and the world economy during this period. I want to dig into it, but it's too late in today's episode to launch into such a big topic. That's why I'm going to devote a full episode, next week, to digging into India's—and to a lesser extent, China's—contribution to the unprecedented global prosperity of this time.

So hold that thought until next week's episode, while we finish out today on some related topics in Indian history. The British administration in India was not entirely callous or unmoved by the famines and the suffering, and reforms were gradually put into place. One was special famine relief funds set up to deal with future famines. Another was the long-delayed move to put the Indian rupee on the gold standard in 1893. To be more precise, the pound sterling was on the

gold standard; in 1893 the value of the rupee was set at 15 to the pound; previously, the rupee was redeemable in silver, and the decline of silver prices in the late 19th century made Indian exports cheap in Britain, to the benefit of the British, while making British exports expensive in India, to the detriment of Indians. More on that next week.

And naturally, not all of British policy was bad for India. There were ways in which the situation was improving. British education and trade policies led to the rise of an Indian middle class. They were small in numbers compared to the overall population, but they were educated and held some wealth, and therefore some power. British education in India promoted the English language and European ideas. Inevitably, whether the British liked it or not, 19th-century European notions about liberalism and democracy and nationalism began percolating through this new Indian middle class. What's more, the railroads the British were building across India, though they were primarily meant for cheaper shipping of Indian exports to British markets, also allowed this new middle class to move around their country more easily and become acquainted with conditions in other parts of India. The English language served as a lingua franca that facilitated communication between Indians of different regions.

The Indian aristocracy had made its peace with British rule. Indeed, they had been the bulwark that protected British rule when it was threatened during the Rebellion of 1857. This newly developing Indian middle class of merchants and traders and business people, by contrast, chafed under a British rule that limited their opportunities, and they formed the nucleus for a growing Indian nationalism.

The development of an educated middle class also meant the growth of newspapers. By 1875, there were over 400 newspapers in India, in English and in many Indian languages. The year 1876 saw the creation in Bengal of the Indian Association, one of the first nationalist political organizations in the country. The association was moderate in its tactics, reliant on peaceful, legal avenues of redress in its complaints against British rule, an approach which would become known in India as "constitutional agitation." One such early agitation concerned the dearth of Indians in the Indian Civil Service. Indians were legally eligible for civil service positions, but in fact by 1875, seventeen years after the Civil Service was founded, you could count the ones who landed these plum positions on the fingers of one hand.

The Indian Association was just the first. The years 1878-1880 saw the Second Anglo-Afghan War, which was a phase of the so-called Great Game of competition between the British and Russian Empires in central Asia and fought in large measure by Indian troops and funded in large measure with Indian tax revenues. This led to discontent in India, and this period saw the founding of additional nationalist groups in other parts of the nation.

Indian discontent also found voice in the country's newspapers. The British Viceroy of the time, Lord Lytton, and his Council enacted the Vernacular Press Act, which empowered the government to censor Indian newspapers, but only the ones printed in Indian languages, not in

English, because we don't censor English language newspapers. A number of Indian organizations protested, the Indian Association the most vehement among them, leading Lord Lytton's successor, the Liberal Lord Ripon, to repeal it in 1881, after the war in Afghanistan was over.

These disputes only strengthened the arguments of nationalists that British rule fell far short of Queen Victoria's high-minded proclamation of 1858 that "[w]e hold ourselves bound to the natives of our Indian territories by the same obligation of duty which bind us to all our other subjects." In 1883, Lord Ripon attempted another reform aimed at equalizing the treatment of Indians and Britons in the courts. It became known as the Ilbert Bill, after the lawyer who drafted it at the Viceroy's direction. The Ilbert Bill permitted Indian judges to preside over cases involving white Europeans. This idea was tremendously unpopular among the British in India, particularly the large landowners who controlled India's tea and indigo plantations. Of course, they didn't want to just say, "Rich white guys shouldn't have to answer to an Indian judge," so some other strategy was needed. Can you guess what it was?

Well, if you checked off "white women" on your racist bingo card, congratulations! You win the prize. Opponents of the bill argued that if a British woman were raped by an Indian man, she would be subjected to the humiliation of having to describe the assault in a courtroom full of Indian men. This would be intolerable, especially since Indian men were well known to show disregard for the rights of Indian women. There was truth in that, though not so much in the wild claim that a British woman defendant ran the risk that an Indian judge might sentence her to confinement in his own private harem.

This extreme backlash against what seemed to most Indians a simple and obvious legal reform, no more than what was right and just, not to mention this hostility bordering on contempt directed against native Indians by the very British who lived among them inspired a counter-movement that brought together the various organizations in the Indian nationalist community to work together to support the bill. In the end, it passed with an amendment requiring a jury to be at least 50% European whenever an Indian judge presided over a case involving a European defendant. That was better than nothing; even so, it enshrined in Indian law the principle that Indians could not be trusted with even a small measure of power over British people, never mind the vast amount of power British people held over Indians.

A partial defeat, but also a partial victory. Indian nationalists felt encouraged by the outcome, enough to explore other opportunities to work together. And circumstances in India were attracting more international attention. The Theosophical Society was founded in the United States in 1875. This was a quirky, syncretic religion-slash-philosophy that took an interest in such diverse realms astrology, the occult, and kabbalah. It also took an interest in Hinduism and Indian philosophy, which helped bring Indian thought into the West and raised awareness of the conditions in India in the United States. In the United Kingdom, Irish nationalists were inviting

Indians to work with them in their mutual quest for greater national autonomy through constitutional means.

In 1883, a 52-year-old former member of the Indian Civil Service named Allan Octavian Hume wrote an open letter to the graduates of the University of Calcutta. In the Civil Service, Hume had been an advocate for agricultural reforms in India and lower taxes on the peasant farmers, and had been demoted and shunted aside for it. He also dabbled in Theosophy and a pretty hardcore birdwatcher, who did extensive work on the side studying the birds of India and publishing some of the first scholarly work on Indian ornithology. In his letter to the university graduates, Hume called upon them to take the lead in organizing and campaigning for greater freedom for India and a larger role for Indians in Indian affairs. He threw down the gauntlet before them. “Every nation secures precisely as good a government as it merits,” he wrote, and challenged these young, educated Indians that if they resented being treated like children by the British, they should stand up and prove they were something more. Later he published a poem on the same theme, *The Old Man’s Hope*, which I quoted from at the top of the episode.

In December 1885, the Indian National Congress was created at a meeting in Bombay of 72 delegates from across India, including Hume, and over the next twenty years, it would rise to become the principal voice for Indian nationalism. The INC, like its predecessor organizations, would embrace the principle of constitutional agitation and campaign for the civil, political, and economic rights of Indians. The INC was, it must be said, the creature of a small elite of educated Hindus. Most poor Indians went about their lives only dimly aware of its work, and Muslim Indians were skeptical of this Hindu-led organization.

Hume’s thinking in encouraging the creation of the INC was that if Indian discontent was not allowed a peaceful, legal outlet, the alternative would be violence and rebellion. The INC had no power. It could merely pass resolutions and make suggestions, many of which were couched in language that was polite to the point that it sounds servile today. But the organization was cohesive enough and persistent enough to arouse the attention and the ire of the British rulers. By the end of the 19th century, INC conferences were drawing over a thousand delegates, even as the Viceroy, Lord Dufferin, dismissed them as a “microscopic minority” among Indians.

In 1899, the Conservative MP George Curzon was made Lord Curzon—you’ll recall that name from previous episodes. He was also appointed the next Viceroy of India. Lord Curzon was not fond of the INC. In 1900 he wrote, “The Congress is tottering to its fall, and one of my greatest ambitions while in India is to assist it to a peaceful demise.” He would not get his wish. In fact, his term as viceroy was destined to provoke fiercer opposition to British rule than had been seen in India since the Rebellion of 1857. And the INC would be leading it.

But that story will have to wait two episodes. We’ll have to stop here for today. I thank you for listening, and I’d especially like to thank Victor and Joshua for making donations, and thank you to Guy for becoming a patron of the podcast. Donors and patrons like Victor and Joshua and

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And I hope you'll join me next week, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*, as we hit the pause button on our survey of Indian history to take a closer look at the economics of British India and ask why so many of the Queen's beloved subjects are, um, dying of starvation. The Victorian Holocausts, next week, here, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

Oh, and one more thing. I can't help but take note of Allan Octavian Hume's remarkable contributions to the study of Indian ornithology during his time in that country, which seems like a very British thing to do. He essentially began the study of Indian birds and organized a network of fellow birders in India to collect information on the native species, which were published in *Stray Feathers*, a journal he founded. He identified a large number of species and collected tens of thousands of specimens which he donated to the Natural History Museum in London. He published books on the subject; sadly, the manuscript that was to be his magnum opus was stolen before he could complete it, destroying years of work.

About a dozen birds and animals in India are named after him. On his return to London, he continued to support Indian nationalism while also taking up the study of botany. He founded the South London Botanical Institute in 1910. Allan Octavian Hume died in 1912, at the age of 83.

[music: Closing Theme]