

# ‘Uniting’ India: A Very Brief Examination of the Role of the British Imperialists

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## Abstract

The essay aims to recall how the English imperialists, in their desire to perpetuate their control over India, gradually united the vast region into almost a single administrative entity.

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, India has become one of the major and more powerful political entities of the world. Globally, it is the largest democracy, and the fourth largest economy (by nominal G.D.P.) (Mukherjee 188). The vast country of 3.3 million square kilometres is (presently) divided into 28 states and 8 union territories. While the Indian states and the union territories of Delhi, Puducherry, and Jammu and Kashmir have elected legislatures, the remaining five union territories are directly ruled by the Government of India through appointed administrators.

The present paper aims at recalling or reviewing the gradual processes, through which – over the years – the sub-continent evolved into (what is presently identified as) ‘the Republic of India’. This, undoubtedly, is a major issue because even as we – quite easily and casually – refer to terms like ‘the Union of India’, ‘the Central government’, ‘the Indian constitution’, ‘Indian governance’, and so on, we often tend to forget how difficult it might have been even to think about ‘uniting’ a country with an (approximate) total of 89 religions, 2,500 ethnic groups, 1,721 languages, and 2,564 political parties into a single nation (Indigenous...)! But this is exactly what had – actually and finally – happened! And the first steps towards this ‘unification’ were taken by the English administrators!

It is an undeniable fact that while the ruthless (English) imperialists annihilated (approximately) 165 million Indians between 1880 and 1920 (alone) through their brutal policies (Nour), they also ‘sincerely’ undertook to unite the subcontinent for the first time – though for their own administrative convenience, and not to accommodate the Indians.

Between 1612 and 1947 – a period of about 335 years – the English traders-turned-imperial-rulers divided the vast region of India into ‘provinces’ or ‘presidencies’. These administrative divisions began as ‘trading posts’ in the early 17<sup>th</sup> century, and, after a period of ‘presidency’-based governance, the English rulers, post-1858, restructured the ‘presidencies’ into ‘provinces’, and extended their boundaries to include regions of what are now the neighbouring countries of India in the east – especially ‘Upper Burma’.

When the English were (gradually) establishing their ‘foothold’ in India (especially the western part of India) during the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the English East India Company (which was to assume administrative charges within 99 years, starting its agents first arrival in Surat 1608) did not have a single or ‘prominent’ administrative head, but was governed by the (so-called) ‘presidents’ and ‘agents’ at individual factories (or ‘trading posts’). Between 1612 (when the British East India Company defeated the Portuguese at the 29-30 November 1612-Battle of Swally and ‘officially’ claimed their mercantile

‘control’ over Surat) and the Battle of Plassey in June 1757 (after which the whole country, virtually, passed under the British East India Company-rule), the British traders began to gradually ‘unite’ the country through trade following permission from the Mughals (and from the Marathas as well). While England, at that time, was being ruled (successively) by James I, Charles I, Oliver and Richard Cromwell, Charles II, James II, William III and Mary II, Anne, George I, and George II, the Mughal rulers during the period mentioned were Jahangir, Shah Jahan I, Aurangzeb, Azam Shah, Bahadur Shah I, Jahandar Shah, Farrukhsiyar, Rafi ud-Darajat, Shah Jahan II, Muhammad Shah, Ahmad Shah Bahadur, and Alamgir II. Following Farrukhsiyar’s marriage to Indira Singh Rathore (c. 1696-1763), the Princess of Jodhpur (Marwar), in December 1715, the grateful Mughal Emperor recalled how (the Scottish) surgeon William Hamilton (d. 1717) had successfully treated him (in August and October 1715 for a haemorrhoid-related disease, which was deferring his marriage) (Singh). In April 1717, he granted the English East India Company the right to ‘trade freely’ (in India), and purchase 38 villages (other than Sutanuti, Gobindapur, and Kalikata). It was the fatal ‘act’, which – unknowingly to the weakened Mughal Emperor – led to the consolidation of the British Empire in the sub-continent and the beginning of the so-called ‘full-time/wholesome union’ of the region!

While the Mughal Empire weakened considerably after the Persian invasion of March 1739 (under Nader Shah Afshar, c. 1698-1747), the English continued to solidify their grip on the country and ‘uniting’ it. As mentioned earlier, on 23 June 1757, the Company forces decisively defeated Siraj ud-Daulah (1733-57) at the Battle of Plassey, and, by 1773, Bengal (as well as the whole region of India) was effectively under the British administrative control. Following the three Anglo-Maratha Wars (1775-1819) and four Anglo-Mysore Wars (1767-99), the British became the undisputed rulers of India, and they continued their quest to unite the region into a single administrative entity.

Robert Clive (1725-74) acted as the de facto British administrative head in India between 1757 and 1760 (he was the Governor of the Bengal Presidency), and he was followed by John Holwell and John Cartier. Clive introduced the (infamous) Dual System of Governance in India/Bengal, dividing the power into Diwani (revenue collection) for the British East India Company, and Nizamat (administration/police) for the Nawab. This ‘arrangement’ gave the English East India Company control without responsibility, and soon resulted in severe economic exploitation, administrative chaos, and the 1770 Bengal Famine, before being abolished in 1772. By that time, India had been – virtually – united into a region of three ‘Presidencies’: the Calcutta Presidency, the Bombay Presidency, and the Madras Presidency, with the Bengal Presidency practically ‘representing’ the whole of the ‘country’.

In 1772, Warren Hastings (1732-1818) became the First Governor General of Bengal (a post he would retain until 1785). In the same year, The East India Company Act 1772 (or The Regulating Act 1773) was passed by England, and this intended to overhaul the management of the East India Company’s affairs in India (Bengal). In 1773, the English East India Company abolished the (so-called) ‘local rule’ or Nizamat in Bengal/India, established its administrative headquarters in Kolkata (then ‘Calcutta’), and involved itself directly in governance.

From the late-18<sup>th</sup> century onwards, the English East India Company in India began to directly annex different hitherto-independent Indian states. Between 1801 and 1856 – a year before the First Indian War of Independence broke out – the Company gradually conquered the region comprising Rohilkhand, Gorakhpur, and the Doab (1801), Delhi (1803), Assam (1828), Sindh (1843), Kashmir (1850), Berar (1854), and Oudh (1856). Moreover, a large number of Indian princely states – among them being Cochin (1791), Jaipur (1794), Travancore (1795), Hyderabad (1798), Mysore (1799), the Gujarat

Gaikwad territories (1807-20) and Rajputana (1818) – also gradually came under the ‘protection’ of the English Empire.

Between 1773 and 1834, Bengal had 10 Governor Generals, including Charles Cornwallis, Gilbert Elliot-Murray-Kynynmound, Francis Rawdon-Hastings, and William Cavendish-Bentinck. Thereafter, the period from April 1834 to November 1858 saw rule by 6 Governor Generals of India, including James Broun-Ramsay and Charles Canning. After the English brutally suppressed the (so-called) ‘Sepoy Mutiny’ (the First Indian War of Independence) in 1858, the whole administration was passed from the hands of the English East India Company directly to the English imperial government.

By this time, the distinctive outlines of India had been formed. It was a vast region of 1.94 million square kilometres and 220 million people. In order to manage the British governance, the British Indian Civil Services were developed, and around 600-700 British civil servants were given the responsibility of managing the imperial customs service, taxes, justice system, and general administration.

With Queen Victoria becoming the Empress of India following the First War of Indian Independence, the English administrators – who had ‘diligently’ united different Indian states into a large country – began to make changes to the hitherto-active presidency system. Previously, when the General Legislative Councils were formed, the British-Indian presidencies, with their governors and councils, enacted regulations for their governments. However, from the mid-19th century onwards, provinces that were acquired and not attached to any of the three presidencies, came to be treated as the ‘non-regulation provinces’, and these included the Cooch Behar State, the Jhansi State, the Ajmer Province, and Kumaon, among others. Moreover, there were 12 regulation provinces, and these included Assam, Andaman and Nicobar Islands, Eastern Bengal and Assam, Bihar and Orissa, and Delhi. Towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, British India was formed of eight provinces, each ruled by a governor or lieutenant-governor. These eight provinces were Bengal, Madras, Burma, Bombay, the United Provinces, the Central Provinces and Berar, Punjab, and Assam. There were five minor provinces as well, and these were administered by chief commissioners. In 1947, just before the Indian independence, British India consisted of 17 provinces, and 20 British Viceroys successively administered the country between 1858 and 1947, including Lord Canning, Lord Elgin, Lord Mayo, Lord Curzon, Lord Irwin, Lord Wavell, and Lord Mountbatten.

The imperial rule had exerted tremendous negative effects on the Indian subcontinent. As Jason Hickel estimates, the English stole around U.S. \$ 45 trillion from the region between 1765 and 1938. Millions and millions of people were annihilated; millions more were tortured. However, the English also ‘achieved’ a seemingly ‘impossible’ task. They united the vast region into a single ‘nation’, though in 1947, they would, once again, bifurcate India on religious grounds. So, whenever we speak about ‘nation’ and ‘nation-building’ in the Indian context, we should remember how the English administrators, in their bid to rule the sub-continent as long as possible, united it into what would later emerge as the strong, independent India.

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