**The British and the Indian Subcontinent**

Between the 16th and the early 18th century most of the Indian subcontinent was ruled by the Muslim dynasty of Mughal emperors based in Delhi.

The majority of its subjects were Hindu and there were reigns which were characterised by official tolerance towards faiths other than Islam. Sikhism, which developed in Punjab in the late 15th century chimed with elements of Hindu and Islamic teaching and was regarded as a political and religious threat by some Mughal rulers.

In response to intense Mughal persecution, the tenth Sikh guru, Gobind Singh in 1699 authorised Sikhs to arm themselves in defence of their faith and a kind of semi-military order of warrior Sikhs called the Khalsa was founded.

Throughout the 18th century as a series of weak Mughal emperors governed from Delhi, Indian princes, owing nominal allegiance to the Mughals established in effect independent kingdoms, some dynasties being Hindu and some Muslim. Simultaneously major European trading companies backed by their governments struggled to dominate the lucrative trade routes to Europe. The two most influential powers, Britain (represented by the British East India Company) and France directly controlled trading enclaves on the Indian coast and fought proxy wars by backing rival Indian princes against each other. By 1800 the British had defeated the French and through the first part of the 19th century expanded their direct rule as they conquered more and more Indian princely states which they either coveted or regarded as a threat to their dominance.

The Sikh ruler Ranjit Singh successfully established a powerful independent kingdom in Punjab between 1801 and 1839 which remained on friendly terms with the British although he developed a formidable military force, armed with the latest European weapons and trained by European and American mercenaries. The existence of this army, referred to as the Khalsa, acted as a deterrent to Ranjit Singh’s enemies and potential enemies which included the British.

After his death in 1839, Punjab became politically unstable and as a result of the Anglo-Sikh Wars (1845-46 and 1848-49) during which the British narrowly escaped defeat, Punjab was annexed to East India Company rule.

Admiring the courage of the defeated Sikh warriors, the British sought to recruit some in to their Indian armies, and allowed them to practise their faith as part of their military service.

By 1857, the British East India Company had extended its rule over most of the Indian subcontinent. However, the Company’s control was badly shaken in 1857 by a mutiny of Hindu and Muslim soldiers supported by some discontented Indian rulers. (This revolt is traditionally known as the Indian Mutiny in Britain but is also called the Great Indian Rebellion and the Sepoy Uprising (*sepoy* being the term for a private). Since Indian independence, the revolt has been known as the First War of Indian Independence in modern India.)

The British suppressed the revolt ruthlessly and valued the loyalty of Sikh troops who assisted them. In 1858 the British Crown assumed direct control of East India Company territory which amounted to around two thirds of the subcontinent. (Subsequently, Queen Victoria assumed the title Empress of India in 1877.) The remaining third of Indian territory was ruled indirectly by client princes (Hindu, Muslim and Sikh).

The British Raj (as the British Indian government was known) from then on took care to recruit their armies from a variety of Indian peoples known as “the martial races” who they identified as superior soldiers. Punjabi Sikhs were one of these “martial races”, although what united them was a common faith rather than ethnicity.

British Indian soldiers saw frequent action in colonial wars fought by the British in Africa and Asia as well as against tribes on the North-West Frontier Province who were believed to be in danger of falling under Russian influence.

In the meantime the British developed an infrastructure for their Indian Empire including railways and offered education for an Indian elite who were intended to assist in the government of the country. It was from this elite that Indian nationalist leaders (including Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs) gradually emerged.

During the First World War (1914-18) over a million Indian soldiers, including Sikhs, fought on behalf of the British Crown. Moderate nationalists like Mohandas Gandhi of the Indian National Congress supported the British war effort in the hope that self-government for Indians might follow. Nationalist opinion became more radical from 1919 after General Dyer ordered his troops to fire on an unarmed crowd of protesters in Amritsar in Punjab. During the 1920s and 1930s the Indian National Congress challenged the legitimacy of British rule in India through a popular policy of non-violent protest. Distrust between the Hindu-dominated Congress and the rival Muslim League grew and was sometimes exploited by the British as part of their traditional “divide and rule” policy. The small number of British officials in the country was increasingly dependent on educated Indian colleagues for its administration.

During the Second World War (1939-45), two and a half million Indian soldiers, including Sikhs, fought for Britain.

In 1940, the Muslim League, fearing Hindu domination in an independent India demanded the creation of a separate state of Pakistan to be carved out of Muslim majority areas after the war. Gandhi and the Indian National Congress continued to campaign for an immediate British withdrawal and complete independence. They were imprisoned in 1942 and Gandhi went on hunger strike but was released two years later.

In 1947, a year earlier than planned, Britain partitioned its Indian Empire between the majority Hindu dominion of India and the majority Muslim dominion of Pakistan. Indian Princely States chose to accede to either India or Pakistan.

Wide spread atrocities were committed as hundreds of thousands of Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs fled their homes across the frontiers of the new states in the largest mass migration of the 20th century. The Sikh homeland of Punjab was portioned between India and Pakistan, who also fought a war over the disputed territory of Kashmir.

Independent India became a republic within the British Commonwealth in 1950 and Pakistan became an Islamic Republic in 1956. East Pakistan became an independent state as Bangladesh in 1971.

From the 1960s migrants from modern India, Pakistan and Bangladesh settled in Britain. Today the British Sikh community numbers approximately 430,000.