

GLOBAL ASIA:

TURNING POINTS IN MODERN ASIAN HISTORY

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Turning Points in South Asia, 1900-2016

Learning the history of a region as diverse as South Asia, which includes India, Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh, can be intimidating. Focusing on five turning points in the region's history is one approach to understanding this vast area.

The birth of modern South Asia in 1947–1948 is perhaps most associated with the great Indian independence leader Mohandas Gandhi. However, two other important players in the birth of modern South Asia are Muhammad Ali Jinnah and Jawaharlal Nehru. Jinnah represented the All-India Muslim League and Nehru the Indian National Congress. Louis Mountbatten,

the Viceroy, represented the British. Jinnah wanted to guarantee rights and protections for India's Muslim minority. Nehru and Mountbatten dismissed this idea as undemocratic: Both envisioned a secular India in which a person's religion wouldn't matter. Jinnah threatened to break off the mainly Muslim parts of India in order to protect Muslim rights, and Nehru and Mountbatten eventually agreed to this. The result was the traumatic Partition, which divided British India into independent Pakistan and India, with Pakistan having wings in the east and west. Jinnah became the first governor-general of Pakistan and Nehru the first prime minister of India.

The birth of Bangladesh in 1971 was a result of the separation of Pakistan's two wings. There were severe imbalances in economic development, political and military power between East and West Pakistan going back to the country's establishment in 1947. When the government, based in West Pakistan, declared that Urdu would be the official language of all Pakistan, the Bangla speakers of East Pakistan felt like second-class citizens in their own country. This, a faulty election in 1970, and disagreements over budget allotment and military organisation, led to East Pakistan declaring independence from West Pakistan in 1971. A brutal civil war followed, with troops from West Pakistan invading East Pakistan in response to the rebellion. Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi (who was the daughter of Nehru but had no relation to Mohandas Gandhi) joined the war on the side of Bangladesh, helping the nation to achieve its independence.

India detonated a nuclear bomb in 1974. By 1974 India's nuclear weapons program detonated its first atomic bomb, code-named *Smiling Buddha*, in an underground test. Pakistani Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto condemned the test as an attempt at regional "Indian hegemony." It took Pakistan several decades to detonate its first atomic bomb, *Chagai-I*, in 1998, followed quickly by another successful Indian test. In response to increasing tensions, in 1999 the Indian government announced a no-first-strike doctrine. By 2004 India and Pakistan had created a hotline to notify

one another of nuclear accidents, so any mishaps could not be mistaken for a nuclear strike.

Indira Gandhi's state of emergency lasted from 1975–1977. Indira Gandhi served as Indian prime minister from 1966–1977 and again from 1980–1984. One of the most controversial moments of her premiership was the 21-month-long Emergency from 1975–1977. During this time, the state of Tamil Nadu's government was dissolved and its leaders arrested, the freedom of the press was severely curtailed, leaders of opposition political parties and of prominent social movements were arrested, compulsory sterilization was enforced to limit population growth, certain songs were banned from national radio, slums were forcefully destroyed, and people were arrested and tortured by the police for having dissenting political opinions. This is modern India's only period of authoritarian rule. Eventually, enough political pressure mounted to force Indira Gandhi to call elections. In 1977 she and the Indian National Congress party were defeated by a broad coalition of opposition political parties and groups that called themselves the Janata, or "Peoples" government.

India's 1991 economic reforms transformed its role in the global economy. By June 1991, India was on the verge of defaulting on its external balance of debt payments, leaving the country with enough foreign reserves to pay for only three weeks' worth of imports. In response, a newly formed government headed by Prime Minister P. V. Narasimha Rao and Finance Minister Manmohan Singh (who later served as prime minister) initiated wide-ranging economic reforms that deregulated and liberalized the Indian economy. India began to focus more on trading deals with Commonwealth nations (especially in Africa) as well as with nations in Europe and the Americas. Partly as a result of these economic reforms, India's gross domestic product has grown more rapidly over the last several decades. In the last several years, India's GDP has been among the fastest growing in the Group of 20 (the 20 largest national economies in the world).

