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HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF E. M. FORSTER'S
A PASSAGE TO INDIA

Forster's England

Although the action of *A Passage to India* takes place entirely in India, it should be remembered that Forster was a British writer, and that most of his readers were British. Thus, the work reflects not only the contemporary India, which is its overt subject, but also England and the milieu in which Forster lived and wrote. Moreover, although Forster published the book in 1924 during the reign of King George V (r. 1910–36), he is commonly regarded as an Edwardian novelist. Forster's first four novels were written in the first decade of the twentieth century, during the reign of King Edward VII (r. 1901–10), and his values and outlook were developed during this period, before World War I. Thus, like Forster's earlier books, *A Passage to India* is commonly regarded as an Edwardian book (an Edwardian novel of manners, at that), even though it was not written during the Edwardian period.

Between the time Forster first visited India and began writing this novel (1912–13) and the time he finished it (1924), Britain had undergone the traumatic experience of World War I. Britain and her allies won the war, but more than 750,000 British soldiers were killed, along with another quarter of a million soldiers from other parts of the British Empire; another two million British and Empire soldiers were wounded, many of them severely. These losses affected people's attitudes toward tradition and authority. The self-confidence that earlier had marked Britain's attitude about its empire and its place in the world, was replaced with doubt and uncertainty.

Nonetheless, although there was some sympathy for the Indian cause, most British people at the time would have supported the British presence in India. Between 1912 and 1924, the British political landscape had also changed. At the beginning of this period, the Liberal Party had been one of the two major parties in Britain. (The other major party was, and remains, the Conservative Party.) The Liberals had won the majority of votes in the election of 1908, and were in power from that time until 1915. However, during this decade the Liberals lost much

of their support to the newer and more radical Labour Party, which favoured a socialist programme. The Labour Party had its first election victory in 1924; by this time, the Liberal Party had dwindled to a third-party status, and it never won another general election. (Forster and most of his circle, including the members of the Bloomsbury Group, were Labour supporters.) Although Labour remained in power for only ten months in 1924, the party had become the main alternative to the Conservatives. During this period the British Empire was beginning to change. This change was most evident in Ireland, the only region of the British Empire that was right on Britain's doorstep. On Easter Sunday, 1916, a group of Irish rebels declared Irish independence from Britain and attempted to seize control of Dublin. Although the British army quickly crushed the rebellion, a more widespread Irish independence movement soon arose, and in 1921 the British government signed a treaty recognizing self-rule for the twenty-six southern counties of Ireland.

The Indian Context

Although the Irish rebellion had no direct effect on British rule of India, the fact that Ireland had gained limited independence helped to strengthen the idea of possible Indian independence in the minds of many Indians. Forster's novel is set during a time of increased tension between the British and their Indian subjects. The British presence in India had begun in the 1600s, when a British trading company, the East India Company, gained a strong foothold in Madras, Bombay, and Calcutta. At this time, much of India was nominally governed by a royal Moslem dynasty, the Moguls. (It was the Mogul emperors and their court that Dr. Aziz in the novel idealized.) However, the Mogul government was weakened by infighting and was unable to control all of India. The Indian population consisted of a number of different ethnic and religious groups, with little sense of an overall Indian identity. The British were thus able to increase their power in India.

In 1773, the English Parliament created the post of Governor General for India. Under Governor-General Cornwallis (1786–93), the British established a sophisticated colonial administration in India. (Cornwallis was also the British general who had surrendered to George Washington at the end of the American Revolutionary War.) Cornwallis instituted a system of British rule that was still mostly intact at the time of *A Passage to India*. Indians were forbidden to hold high government office and were subject to other laws that kept them in a subservient position, both legally and economically. A number of areas of the country known as Native States or Independent States were not under direct British rule, but were governed by local Indian princes or maharajahs. However, the British authorities kept close watch on these states, which had friendly policies toward the British.

The British suppressed an Indian rebellion (known as the Indian Mutiny or Sepoy Rebellion) in 1857. By the time of *A Passage to India*, there was a significant organized movement for Indian equality and eventual independence, in the form of the Indian National Congress. In 1919, nearly 400 Indians were shot to death and another 1,200 wounded when soldiers under British command opened fire on a crowd that had gathered illegally in the northeast Indian town of Amritsar. The Amritsar Massacre, as it became known, caused a public outcry both in India and Britain. India stood poised on the edge of widespread violence. In this tense atmosphere, a British-educated Indian lawyer named Mohandas K. Gandhi began a long non-violent campaign of civil disobedience against British rule. Gandhi advocated Indian equality as well as peaceful cooperation between the country's Hindu and Moslem populations. Forster does not mention Gandhi or the Amritsar Massacre, but the division between India's Hindus and Moslems is a major concern in the novel.

There is some critical dispute over the time period during which Forster's novel is set. One Indian who admired the book believed that it was representative of India at the time of Forster's first visit, 1912. One American critic has claimed that the action occurs "out of time." Most critics and readers feel that the action takes place in the early 1920s, contemporary with the time that the book was finished and published. In any case, Forster's novel is not only concerned with its own time but also looks forward to the future. The novel hints that the two groups may be able to put aside their traditional differences and live in harmony as Indians. However, this did not turn out to be the case. As independence grew nearer, Moslems demanded the creation of a separate Moslem nation, Pakistan. Indian independence in 1947 was accompanied by violent clashes between Hindus and Moslems, with tens of thousands of deaths on both sides. The next year, Gandhi was assassinated by a Hindu fanatic who believed that Gandhi was making too many compromises with the Moslems. Ironically, today both India and Pakistan have relatively good relations with Britain and the British. So it is likely that Dr. Aziz and Mr. Fielding would today be able to have the sort of uninhibited friendship that is mentioned at the end of the book.

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