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**FORSTER'S A PASSAGE
TO INDIA**



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Edward Forster's
**A Passage to
India**

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Life of E. M. Forster

Edward Morgan Forster was born in London in 1879, the son of an architect. He attended Tonbridge School, which he hated; he caricatured what he termed “public school behavior” in several of his novels. A different atmosphere awaited him at King’s College, Cambridge, which he enjoyed thoroughly.

After graduation, he began to write short stories. He lived for a time in Italy, the scene of two of his early novels: *Where Angels Fear to Tread* (1905), and *A Room with a View* (1908). Cambridge is the setting for *The Longest Journey* (1907). It was in this year that he returned to England and delivered a series of lectures at Working Men’s College. His most mature work to date was to appear in 1910 with the publication of *Howards End*.

Forster then turned to literary journalism and wrote a play which was never staged. In 1911 he went to India with G. Lowes Dickinson, his mentor at King’s College. During World War 1, Forster was engaged in civilian war work in Alexandria. He returned to London after the war as a journalist.

In 1921 he again went to India, to work as secretary to the Maharajah of Dewas State Senior. He had begun work on *A Passage to India* before this time, but on reading his notes in India, he was discouraged and put them aside. The book was published in 1924, having been written upon his return to England. This was his last novel. It is considered to be his *magnum opus*, and it won for the author the Femina Vie Heureuse and the James Tait Black Memorial prizes in 1925.

In 1927 Forster delivered the William George Clark lectures at Trinity College, Cambridge. Titled *Aspects of the Novel*, the lectures were published in book form the same year. Also in 1927 he became a Fellow of Cambridge.

Forster’s writing after that time has been varied. A collection of short stories (*The Eternal Moment*) was published in 1928. *Abinger Harvest* (1936) is a collection of reprints of reviews and articles. During World War II he broadcast many essays over the BBC. He has written a pageant play (*England’s Pleasant Land*), a film (*Diary For Timothy*), two biographies (*Goldsworthy Lowes Dickinson* in 1934 and Marianne Thornton in 1956), a libretto for Benjamin Britten’s opera, *Billy Budd* (with Eric Crozier), and numerous essays. In 1953 he published *The Hill of Devi*, an uneven collection of letters and reminiscences of his experiences

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in India.

In 1960 *A Passage to India* was adapted for the stage by Santha Rama Rau. After playing in London for a year, the play opened on Broadway on January 31, 1962, and ran for 110 performances. Although Forster was “delighted” with the adaptation, most of the American critics felt the play did not measure up to the novel. Forster has never agreed to film versions of his novels.

In 1946, Forster moved to King’s College in Cambridge to live there as an honorary fellow. Mr. Forster’s numerous awards included membership in the Order of Companions of Honour, a recognition bestowed in 1953 by Queen Elizabeth II.

The British Raj in India

India was accustomed to invaders by the time the English arrived in the seventeenth century. Beginning with the great Indo-Aryan invasion (2400-1500 B.C.), the natives of the Indian subcontinent had seen parts of their land overrun by conquering armies of Huns, Arabs, Persians, Tartars, and Greeks. Buddhists, Hindus, and Moslems had ruled over parts of the vast country. None had succeeded in ruling all of India—none until Great Britain came onto the scene.

The English arrived at an opportune time, during the disintegration of the Mogul Empire, which had controlled most of India from 1526 until the death of Aurangzeb in 1707. As the empire dissolved, wars for power between Marathas, Persians, and Sikhs began. The English took advantage of these conflicts.

The English did not come as invaders or conquerors; they came as traders. When the British East India Company was formed in 1600, its agents were in competition with the French and Portuguese traders who had preceded them. Whereas the other European traders kept aloof from Indian affairs, the English became involved in them. Trade was their most important consideration, but fortifications and garrisons were necessary to insure security. Warring princes were very interested in obtaining European arms and military skills for their own purposes and willingly paid for them with cash, credit, or grants of land.

In this way power was gradually gained by the British East India Company until in 1757 Robert Clive gained control of India in the Battle of Plassey. In 1774 Warren Hastings became the first governor-general of India; during his regime the foundations of the civil service system were laid and a system of law courts was organized. The power was still in the hands of the East India Company; the company agents extended their control and obtained the right to collect taxes.

The Sepoy Rebellion in 1857 was an attempt by the Mogul emperor to regain power, and it showed a desire on the part of Indians to win back control of their own country. The rebellion, which lacked organization, support, and leadership, left widespread bitterness. In 1858 the British government took over rule of India, with power in the hands of the British Parliament. Great Britain indirectly controlled various territories, known as “Indian States,” where the rulers were rewarded for support

during the rebellion: titles were conferred, autonomy was granted, and protection against possible revolts was assured.

In 1885 the Indian National Congress was formed. Little more than a debating society, it did represent every geographical area and all religious groups and castes. In 1906 the Moslem League was formed to advance the cause of Mohammedanism in India.

From 1858 to 1914 England firmly established its rule over the country. English governors at the head of each province were responsible to the governor-general (or viceroy) who was appointed by the King of England and responsible to Parliament. In 1877 Queen Victoria was declared Empress of India.

In return for helping Great Britain in World War 1, Indians were promised a share in their own government. This was far from independence, for repressive measures were directed against India. More Indians, however, were elected to the legislature and Indians, for the first time, sat on the Viceroy's Council. There was a constant struggle for independence. The Amritsar Massacre in 1919 indicated the extent of unrest and trouble among the Indians.

India was guaranteed independence before it agreed to help the Allies in World War II. In 1946 Clement Atlee, Prime Minister of Great Britain, offered complete independence as soon as Indian leaders could agree on a form of government that could manage a free India. By 1947 it was clear that only partition could resolve the conflict among the Indian peoples. India and Pakistan became dominions in the British Commonwealth of Nations. In 1949, the new constitution declared the Union of India to be a sovereign democratic republic.

General Summary

A Passage to India was divided by E. M. Forster into three parts. The first part, "Mosque," begins with what is essentially a description of the city of Chandrapore. The physical separation of the city into sections, plus the separation of earth and sky, are indicative of a separation of deeper significance that exists between the Indian and English sectors.

This novel deals with human relationships, and the theme that determines its plot line is introduced in this section: "Is it possible for the Indian and the Englishman to be friends?" To show both sides of this question, the reader is first introduced to Dr. Aziz and his friends. Aziz is a Moslem doctor who practices at the government hospital in Chandrapore under the supervision of Major Callendar. Among Aziz's friends are Hamidullah, an Indian barrister who has lived in England; Nawab Bahadur, an influential landowner; and Mahmoud Ali. In the opening chapters these men are shown discussing the English officials who govern under the British Raj in India.

Among the English faction, who also discuss the Anglo-Indian relationship, are Mr. Turton, the Collector; Major Callendar, the English doctor; Mr. McBryde, the police magistrate; and Ronny Heaslop, the city magistrate and the latest official to assume duties in Chandrapore.

Between these groups, or outside them, are Cyril Fielding, the English principal of the government school, whose allegiance belongs to neither group; Mrs. Moore, mother of Ronny Heaslop, who has come to India as chaperone to Miss Adela Quested, Ronny's intended fiancée; Professor Godbole, a Hindu who is separated from the Moslems by his religion and* from the English by his religion and nationality; and the English missionaries, Mr. Graysford and Mr. Sorley, who share none of the arrogance of English officialdom as they attempt to convert the Indians to Christianity.

The story opens with Aziz's arrival at Hamidullah's house, where he is to spend a social evening with his friends. Their conversation centers upon the indignities that the Indian must suffer at the hands of the English officials and their wives. Young Ronny Heaslop, whom they dub the "red-nosed boy," is a particular object of ridicule.

Aziz is summoned to the house of his superior, Major
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Callendar. He is late in arriving and when he arrives, he finds the major gone. Two English women preempt his tonga and on the walk back to his house he encounters Mrs. Moore at the mosque. The old lady endears herself to Aziz by her innate understanding of him and of Moslem custom; he calls her an Oriental.

Later, at the English club, Adela Quested expresses her desire to see the “real India” and is advised by a passerby to “try seeing Indians.” To humor her Mr. Turton offers to give a “Bridge Party,” a garden party ostensibly designed to bridge the distance between the English and the Indian, and to give Adela and Mrs. Moore the opportunity to meet socially some of the upper-class Indians.

At Mrs. Moore’s cottage that night Ronny and his mother discuss her encounter with Aziz at the mosque. Ronny shows his unmistakable prejudice and Mrs. Moore is appalled at his inhumane attitude. On her way to bed, she exhibits a sympathetic response to a wasp, one of the least of India’s creatures.

On the outskirts of the town, Mr. Sorley, the younger and more liberal of the two English missionaries, while willing to accept that there may well be a heaven for mammals, cannot bring himself to admit the lowly wasp.

The garden party given by the Turtons only serves to show more clearly the division of peoples, as each group keeps to itself. Cyril Fielding, who mingles freely with the Indians, is impressed by the friendliness of Mrs. Moore and Adela and invites them to tea at his home. They are also invited for a Thursday morning visit—which never materializes—to the home of the Bhattacharya’s, a Hindu couple.

That evening, in a discussion with Ronny, Mrs. Moore is again appalled by her son, and quotes to him from the Bible, reminding him that God is love and expects man to love his neighbor (though she herself has found Him less satisfying in India than ever before). Ronny humors her, reminding himself that she is old.

At tea at Fielding’s house, Mrs. Moore and Adela visit pleasantly with Aziz and Professor Godbole, enigmatic Hindu associate of Mr. Fielding. The kindness of Mrs. Moore and Adela Quested prompts Aziz to invite them on an outing to the Marabar Caves, which they accept. Ronny Heaslop arrives at Fielding’s cottage to take his mother and Adela to a game of polo; his discourtesy to Aziz and his arrogant demeanor toward all Indians

causes Adela and Ronny to quarrel, and Adela tells Ronny she cannot marry him.

Later the young people go for a ride with Nawab Bahadur, and when the automobile is involved in an accident with an unidentified animal on a back road, they are drawn together once more and announce their engagement. Mrs. Moore accepts the news calmly, but when told of the accident she murmurs, "A ghost!"

Aziz, pleased with the friendship shown him by Cyril Fielding, shows the English professor a picture of his dead wife, a courtesy equal to inviting Fielding behind the purdah, the highest honor an Indian can give.

The next section, "Caves," begins with a detailed description of the Marabar Caves, the peculiar hollow caverns within the equally curious Marabar Hills that rise from an otherwise flat area outside the city of Chandrapore.

It is to these caves that Aziz has planned an elaborate trip for Mrs. Moore and Adela Quedsted. He has also included Fielding and Godbole in the invitation. Unfortunately, Fielding and Godbole miss the train and Aziz is left in full charge of the expedition, which begins with a train ride and ends with an elephant ride to the immediate vicinity of the caves. In the first cave Mrs. Moore is terrified by an echo and the press of the crowd and declines to go farther.

Aziz, a guide, and Adela go on alone. Adela, pondering her engagement to Ronny, unwisely asks Aziz if he has more than one wife. The excitable little Indian, upset by her queries, dashes into a cave to recover his composure. Adela wanders aimlessly into another cave and is supposedly assaulted by someone there. She rushes down the side of the hill, where she meets Nancy Derek, an English companion to a maharani, who has brought Fielding to the caves. Nancy returns the overwrought Adela to Chandrapore.

In the meantime Aziz, knowing nothing of what has happened to Adela, entertains his other friends and returns with them by train. At the station he is met by Mr. Haq, the police inspector, who arrests him for assaulting Miss Quedsted.

Fielding alienates himself from the English by siding with Aziz. The English rally around Adela and press for a quick conviction. Mrs. Moore, now sunk into a state of apathy, refuses to admit that Aziz may be guilty but also refuses to testify in his

behalf in court; Ronny arranges passage for her to England. On the way she dies; her name, however, becomes for a time a legend to the natives of Chandrapore.

At the trial, Adela Quested, who has been in a state of shock since the incident at the caves, suddenly finds her mind clear again and exonerates Aziz. Her withdrawal of the charge against Aziz causes her to be ostracized by the English. Fielding reluctantly offers her the use of his cottage while he is absent on official business, and Ronny eventually breaks their engagement. Disillusioned by her experience in India, Adela returns to England; and Fielding persuades Aziz to drop a damage suit against her.

Two years later the setting of the novel shifts to the Hindu state of Mau in a section entitled "Temple." Following the trial, Fielding had returned to England, married, and was then sent on a tour of central India to inspect government schools. Godbole has become the Minister of Education at Mau, and through his influence, Aziz has become personal physician to the Rajah of Mau.

The opening chapter of this section describes a Hindu ceremony honoring the birth of the god Krishna. Professor Godbole directs the temple choir and, in an ecstasy of religious fervor, dances his joy. While in this almost trancelike state he remembers Mrs. Moore and a wasp, associating them as he contemplates the love of God. The biblical statement "God is Love," with which Mrs. Moore had exhorted her son, is repeated in the Hindu ceremony, although through an error in its printing it becomes "God si Love."

Aziz is annoyed when he discovers that Fielding is visiting Mau in line with his official duties. He has become thoroughly disillusioned with the British and even with Fielding; when he learned that Fielding had married in England, he concluded that the wife was Adela Quested and henceforth refused to read any of Fielding's letters. Aziz has married again and has his children with him. Although he does not embrace Hinduism, he is tolerant of their festivals and is finding peace and contentment away from British domination. He has, however, let his practice of medicine degenerate until he is little more than a glorified medicine man.

When Aziz meets Fielding again, he learns that Stella Moore, not Adela Quested, is Fielding's wife. Stella and her brother Ralph have accompanied Fielding to India. Aziz forms a special

attachment for Ralph, whose bee stings he treats, because Ralph shows many of the traits of his mother, Mrs. Moore.

The Hindu festival continues after the celebration of the birth of the god. Fielding and Stella go out in a boat to better observe the ceremony, as do Aziz and Ralph in another boat. In the storm the boats collide with each other and capsize. In the general confusion that follows, the ceremony comes to an end and the English return to the guest house. Aziz has confided to Ralph that the rajah has died, but the announcement of his death is suspended until after the festival.

Hinduism affects both Stella and Ralph, but Fielding cannot understand the effect it has on them, though he is intrigued by it. Aziz believes that Ralph, at least, has an Oriental mind, as Mrs. Moore had.

Although Fielding finds that the school that Professor Godbole was to superintend has been neglected and the building turned into a granary, he does nothing to rectify the situation. The floods, which have kept Fielding in Mau, abate, and he and his party make plans to leave. Before they go, Fielding and Aziz take a final horseback ride together. Good-naturedly, they argue about the Anglo-Indian problem. Aziz excitedly declares that India must be united and the English driven out. Sensing that this is the end of their association, Aziz and Fielding attempt to pledge eternal friendship in spite of their differences, but the path narrows and their horses are forced apart, signifying that such a friendship is not yet possible.

List of Characters

Adela Quested

A young woman newly arrived from England, expecting to be the fiancée of Ronny Heaslop.

Mrs. Moore

Adela's chaperone and Ronny Heaslop's mother, by her first marriage.

Ronny Heaslop

The City Magistrate of Chandrapore.

Doctor Aziz

The Moslem doctor at the Government Hospital.

Major and Mrs. Callendar

A Civil Surgeon and Aziz's superior; and his wife.

Cyril Fielding

The English Principal at the Government College.

Professor Godbole

The Hindu colleague of Fielding's.

Hamidullah

Aziz's uncle and eminent Moslem barrister.

Mahmoud Ali

Pleader (attorney) in the court, and friend of Aziz.

Ram Chand, Syed Mohammed, and Mr. Haq

Friends of Aziz.

Mr. Das

Ronny's assistant and the Hindu judge at the trial.

Nawab Bahadur

The wealthy, influential friend of Aziz.

Mr. and Mrs. McBryde

The District Superintendent of Police and his wife.

Nancy Derek

A guest of the McBryde's and the companion of a maharani in a native state.

Mr. and Mrs. Turton

Collector, head of British officialdom and social leader of Chandrapore; and his wife.

Mr. Armitrao

The lawyer from Calcutta who takes Aziz's case.

Nureddin

Grandson of Nawab Bahadur.

Ralph Moore

Mrs. Moore's son by her second marriage.

Stella Moore

Mrs. Moore's daughter, who becomes the wife of Cyril Fielding.

Mr. and Mrs. Lesley

A British official and his wife.

Karin, Ahmed, Jamila

Children of Aziz.

Doctor Panna Lal

Hindu colleague of Aziz.

Mohammed Latif

Poor relative who lives in the house of Hamidullah.

Mr. Graysford and Mr. Sorley

Missionaries who live on the outskirts of Chandrapore.

Lord and Lady Mellanby

The Lieutenant Governor and his wife.

Mrs. Bhattacharya

The Indian woman who invites Adela and Mrs. Moore to her house and then neglects to send a carriage for them.

Chapter Commentaries

Part I

Chapters 1-3

Chandrapore is an undistinguished Indian town except for the outlying Marabar Caves. The language that Forster uses to describe the town creates the feeling of monotony, vast space, and infinity. The separation of the English settlement from the Indian is as distinct in the character and attitudes of the people as it is in the physical appearance of the houses and grounds.

Forster uses the sky as the symbolic arch which is almost the only common link between the two national groups. By implication, he contrasts the infinite power and mystery of the immense sky with the discordant affairs of earthbound men.

Changes in weather and types of weather are common symbols used by authors to indicate changes in moods or deeper meanings. In this book, Forster shows the sky as a source of strength as it governs the weather and the seasons. The earth is shown to be dependent upon the caprices of the sky. Words such as “glory” and “benediction” give the sky divine attributes. In his notes in the Everyman Edition, Forster records that the three parts of the book correspond to the three seasons of India: the cold season, which is just ending in the Mosque section, the hot season, which dominates the Caves section, and the rainy season, which occurs during the Temple section.

A central question of the novel is presented in Chapter 2: “Can the Indians and the English become friends?” The problems involved in interracial relationships determine the main lines of the plot’s structure.

The Indians are introduced as intelligent and perceptive people who resent their treatment by the British but generally accept it with a humorous cynicism. Forster, although he depicts Indian failings, quite frankly sympathizes with the Indian attitude rather than with the English. Part of his concern was to show the evils of political rule of one nation over another. The major Indian characters in this novel are educated men who are capable of independent action. They must serve under minor or major British officials who rarely make any effort to consider the Indian

viewpoint about anything. The Indians are expected to obey the British without question.

Some of the older Indians judge the English both as a group and as individuals: Hamidullah, for example, recalls the fine English people with whom he lived in Cambridge. In India, however, only the English are free to make overtures of friendship. The Indians know from past experiences, too, that the friendly English newcomers usually become tiresomely condescending in a short time under the influence of the career British officials. (It will be seen throughout the book that most of the English think of the Indians as a group. It is a rare English person who dignifies an Indian as an individual.)

The reader meets Aziz's aunt, a Moslem woman in purdah (an Indian custom by which women live in seclusion). The only men to see women's faces were the men in their immediate families. It was commonly thought that Indian women were unimportant shadows in the background. Forster suggests that the sheltered Indian women were often women with lively minds whose opinions were sought and valued. Their men enjoyed visiting with them as equals.

Part 1, therefore, begins with an introduction to India from the Moslem viewpoint. (The term "Mohammedan," used by Westerners as a synonym for "Moslem," is considered objectionable by the professors of this faith. Mohammed, or Muhammed, was not divine; he was simply the messenger of Allah. The terms "Moslem" to define the person and "Islam" to mean the religion are considered correct.) This viewpoint is shown primarily through the warm, impulsive, young Aziz.

It is important to remember that Aziz calls Mrs. Moore an Oriental. The conflict of the Oriental mind and the Western mind is an important one in this novel, because it is the basis of much of the misunderstanding. Mrs. Moore has the ability to cross the lines. It is further important to remember the inscription that Aziz would choose for his tomb: he cherishes the "secret understanding of the heart" and values that quality in others.

Forster uses Chapters 2 and 3 to contrast Indian and English customs, attitudes, and beliefs. He shows the Indians at home discussing the English, followed by the English at the club discussing the Indians. Both groups are revealing likes, dislikes, and preconceived judgments about each other. Only the reader is seeing both sides and the elements that shape the problem of

Anglo-Indian dissension in India.

It is well to review these two chapters in detail to gain the feeling of differences between the groups. Look for contrasting viewpoints. For example, notice the difference in attitudes in the Major Callendar-Aziz episode. The major expected Aziz promptly; Aziz tarried with his friends and was delayed further by an accident to his bicycle. The underlying conflict is in the attitude toward time.

Highly organized nations and people put a premium on promptness; visitors to foreign lands, where life is slower, often notice that their time has only relative value. Punctuality, to a native of a country such as India, is not a major virtue; but courtesy is. The major, however, waiting to go to the club, becomes impatient at the delay and dashes off to settle the matter without leaving a message, without considering that Aziz may have a social life which would take him away from his house. Both men feel a sense of injustice.

Such opposing points of view serve as a constant source of irritation on both sides. Very few of the characters are able to overlook such petty differences and to find planes of common respect. Underlying these surface differences is, of course, the feeling of superiority of the British ruling class and the sting the Indian feels as the subject race.

The principal characters begin to emerge more distinctly from this point. Mrs. Moore and Aziz are revealed as persons of spirit and determination. Fielding's one line at the club, "Try seeing Indians," discloses that he shares their broader thinking.

Ronny Heaslop is shown for what he is: the kind of person who seems to have been stamped out with a cookie cutter. He is a product of England's public school system and adopts quickly and completely the attitudes of his British colleagues in India. This solves the inconvenience of thinking for himself and, of course, simplifies his relationship with his colleagues.

Contrast Ronny's statement about the subject race with the ideas of the newcomers, Mrs. Moore and Miss Quested. One should give careful consideration to the way Mrs. Moore begins her acquaintance with India. She respects what she cannot understand, as at the mosque. She puzzles her son, Ronny, by describing Aziz as a "young man" rather than as a young native. Later, she is almost swayed by Ronny's interpretation of the

incident until she realizes that Ronny does not really know Aziz and that he is judging him simply as an Indian. Aziz is, to Ronny, not a young man to whom one accords the dignity of his position, but a young Indian who has dared to converse on an equal basis with an Englishwoman.

Adela Quested develops as a possible “thorn-in-the-side” person because she questions blanket judgments. She is a plain, fair-minded young woman with a questing mind and with (so she believes) an interest in knowing the Indians as they really are. She has the perception to wonder if she can be happy with a “rubber-stamp” British official as she questions Ronny’s acceptance of the opinions of the 20-year men in the British Raj.

Fielding’s comment, “Try seeing Indians” is a key to understanding this man’s broader thinking. He seems to be saying: Stop looking at India. Try seeing the Indians as people with all the common problems that people everywhere have to meet.

The comments and thoughts of Fielding and Mrs. Moore should be observed closely. Their viewpoints, although different from each other, are unusually objective, and through their eyes the reader is able to view the problems more objectively.

In the opening chapters observe Forster’s use of symbols. These symbols carry a thread of meaning throughout the novel. For instance, in the first chapter special significance is given to the sky. In Chapter 3 the moon becomes a symbol of universality: Mrs. Moore wonders if she is looking at the other side of the moon, the side never seen in England. A person passing by overhears, and comments that even on the other side of the world, it is still the same old moon.

Consider the implied meanings. Geographical location may change, but the same moon shines down upon everyone. There is a universal oneness—the oneness that might be achieved among all people, but which now exists only in the natural world. Later, when Mrs. Moore looks up at the moon, she feels a curious kinship with all heavenly bodies. This is the first portent of the transcendent nature of Mrs. Moore’s thoughts.

The wasp symbol which crops up throughout the novel appears here for the first time. It is associated with Mrs. Moore’s spiritual sensibility; and later the Hindu, Professor Godbole, is to associate the wasp with his memory of Mrs. Moore when he is participating in a religious ceremony. Both Mrs. Moore and the professor have