

Em Forster

DCUS.online — ঢাকা কেন্দ্রীয় বিশ্ববিদ্যালয়ের শিক্ষার্থীদের জন্য

Overview — the story in simple English

A Passage to India by E. M. Forster is set in British India, in a made-up city called Chandrapore, during the time of the British Raj (ব্রিটিশ শাসন). The story begins when an old Englishwoman, Mrs Moore, comes to India to visit her son Ronny, and she brings a young woman, Adela Quested, who may marry him. One night Mrs Moore meets a kind young Indian Muslim doctor named Aziz in a mosque (মসজিদ), and they quickly become friends. A sympathetic English teacher, Cyril Fielding, also becomes Aziz's friend, and for a short time it looks as if Indians and English people can trust one another. To please the visitors, Aziz arranges a big trip to the mysterious Marabar Caves. Inside the dark caves something strange and frightening happens: Adela panics and later accuses (অভিযোগ করা) Aziz of trying to attack her. Aziz is arrested, and the whole town splits into two angry camps — the English against the Indians. At the trial (বিচার) Adela suddenly tells the truth: she withdraws (প্রত্যাহার করা) her charge, and Aziz is set free. But the damage is done: hurt and bitter, Aziz turns against the English, and even his friendship with Fielding cannot survive the wound. In the final part, years later in a Hindu state during a religious festival, the two men meet again and try to be friends, yet the land itself seems to say "not yet." The novel asks whether people of different races and cultures can ever truly connect (সংযোগ) under colonial rule.

 **One-line meaning:** *Under the injustice of empire, personal goodwill is not strong enough to join East and West — real friendship must wait until India is free.*

Quick Facts	
Published	1924 (Forster's last novel published in his lifetime)
Genre	Modernist novel; political and symbolic novel of colonial India
Setting	Chandrapore (a fictional city) and the Marabar Caves, British India, early 1920s
Structure / Narration	Three parts — "Mosque," "Caves," "Temple"; third-person omniscient narrator
Title source	Taken from Walt Whitman's poem "Passage to India"

Themes & Technique

- The British Raj and colonial rule.** The novel shows how British officials rule India with pride, coldness and suspicion. The English club, the Collector and the police treat Indians as inferiors (নিম্নশ্রেণির). Forster exposes how empire poisons ordinary human feeling and makes true equality almost impossible.
- Friendship across race — "Can Indian and Englishman be friends?"** This is the central question of the book. Aziz and Fielding genuinely like each other, and Mrs Moore treats Aziz as a human being. Yet politics, race and mistrust keep pulling them apart, and the ending suggests such friendship cannot yet fully succeed.
- Separation and the failure to connect.** Again and again characters try to "reach" one another and fail. The bridge party fails, the caves trip ends in disaster, and even good people misunderstand each other. Forster suggests that the colonial world is built on distance, not union.

4. **Muddle and mystery — India as the unknowable.** India is shown as vast, confusing and beyond Western logic. Fielding calls it a "muddle" (গোলমাল); others feel it as a "mystery." The Marabar Caves, with their meaningless echo, stand for a universe that may be empty of order and value.
5. **Religion and the search for unity.** The three parts follow three faiths — Islam (the Mosque), a doubting Christianity (the Caves), and Hinduism (the Temple). Only the Hindu festival, with its messy embrace of all creation, offers a hint of the oneness that human beings long for.
6. **Race, prejudice and the Anglo-Indian community.** The English residents (the "Anglo-Indians") form a closed, arrogant society that despises Indians and rallies together the moment one of their women feels threatened. Forster satirizes (ব্যঙ্গ করা) their snobbery and fear.
7. **Gender and colonial anxiety.** Adela's accusation feeds the colonial myth that white women must be "protected" from native men. The trial shows how race-fear and gender-fear combine to deny an Indian justice.

Narrative technique

- **Three-part symbolic structure** — "Mosque / Caves / Temple," matching three religions and three moods.
- **Rhythm and leitmotif** — repeated images (the **echo**, the overarching **sky**, the **wasp**) return like musical notes to give the book unity (Forster's own idea of "rhythm" in fiction).
- **Omniscient narrator with irony** — the narrator sees into every group and gently mocks English pride.
- **Free indirect discourse** — we slip inside characters' thoughts (Mrs Moore, Aziz, Adela) to feel their confusion.
- **Symbolism** — landscape and objects (the caves, the sky, the river) carry meanings larger than the plot.

Key Quotations — memorize

- "Except for the Marabar Caves — and they are twenty miles off — the city of Chandrapore presents nothing extraordinary." (*the narrator, opening lines — the caves dominate the book from the very first sentence.*)
- "Everything exists, nothing has value." (*the meaning Mrs Moore takes from the cave's echo — her vision of a universe drained of value.*)
- "Why can't we be friends now?" (*Fielding to Aziz, in the final chapter — the hope of friendship.*)
- The land's answer to that hope — the earth, and the "No, not yet," and the sky's "No, not there" — closes the novel: friendship must wait. (*final lines; safe to quote only these three short phrases.*)
- The banner at the Hindu festival reads "God si love" — a misprint for "God is love," suggesting that human attempts to express the divine are always a little imperfect. (*Temple section.*)
- The three section titles themselves — "Mosque," "Caves," "Temple" — are worth naming in any answer on structure or symbolism.
- The echo of the Marabar Caves reduces every sound to one dull noise, so that beautiful and ugly words come back exactly the same. (*paraphrase of the caves' effect — use to explain the theme of nothingness.*)
- Early in the book Aziz's friends debate whether it is really possible for an Indian to be friends with an Englishman — the question the whole novel then tests. (*paraphrase, opening discussion.*)

Rule for the exam: only the short lines above shown inside quotation marks are safe to write word-for-word. For everything else, explain the idea in your own words rather than risk a wrong quote.

Critics' Views (safe to cite)

Critic	View	Use for
Lionel Trilling	Called <i>A Passage to India</i> Forster's masterpiece; argued its real subject is the difficulty of human connection and the "muddle" of India, not politics alone	Intro; theme of connection and separation
Edward Said	In <i>Culture and Imperialism</i> , showed the novel exposes empire yet cannot imagine an independent India; its vision stops at the colonial horizon	British Raj; postcolonial critique
Benita Parry	In <i>Delusions and Discoveries</i> , studied how India was imagined by British writers; Forster both criticises imperial attitudes and is limited by them	British Raj; portrayal of Indian society
Frederick Crews	In <i>The Perils of Humanism</i> , read the book as a test of liberal humanism that finds personal goodwill unable to defeat political forces	Friendship's failure; conclusion
Wilfred Stone	In <i>The Cave and the Mountain</i> , gave a major symbolic reading of the caves and of the novel's whole design	Symbolism; Marabar Caves
Malcolm Bradbury	Stressed Forster's use of "rhythm" and repeated motifs (echo, sky, wasp) to give the novel a musical unity	Symbolism; narrative technique

Exam Q&A Bank

Part A — Reference to Context (5 marks)

Passage 1 — 🔥 Very likely

"Except for the Marabar Caves — and they are twenty miles off — the city of Chandrapore presents nothing extraordinary."

These are the opening lines of *A Passage to India* (1924) by E. M. Forster, spoken by the omniscient narrator as the book introduces its setting. The narrator paints Chandrapore as a dull, muddy town on the river where nothing seems remarkable — *except* the distant Marabar Caves. The significance is large. By placing the caves in the very first sentence, and setting them apart with dashes, Forster warns us that these strange, empty caves will dominate the story. They are the symbolic (প্রতীকী) heart of the novel: the place where Adela will make her terrible accusation, where Mrs Moore will lose her faith, and where the "echo" of meaninglessness begins. The quiet opening also creates irony, because this "nothing extraordinary" town will soon explode into a racial and legal storm. The passage introduces Forster's key method of using landscape as symbol.

Passage 2 — 🔥 Very likely

"Why can't we be friends now?"

This line comes from the final chapter of *A Passage to India* by E. M. Forster; it is spoken by Cyril Fielding, the English college principal, to his Indian friend Dr Aziz. The two men are riding together in a Hindu state, years after the trial that ruined their trust. Fielding, now married, still longs for the old friendship and asks why they cannot simply be friends again. The significance is that this single question sums up the whole novel's central problem — whether Englishman and Indian can truly connect under empire. Aziz wants it too, but the answer, Forster shows, is "not yet": the horses swerve apart, and the very earth and sky seem to refuse the union. The passage proves that in a colonized (ঔপনিবেশিক) land personal goodwill alone cannot overcome political and racial division. Real friendship, Forster suggests, must wait until India is free.

Part B — Short Notes (5 marks)

Why does the bridge party fail? — 🔥 Very likely (both years)

The "Bridge Party" is a garden party given by Mr Turton, the English Collector, supposedly to "bridge the gulf" (দূরত্ব) between the English and the Indians of Chandrapore. It is arranged only because Adela Quested has said she wants to see the "real India." From the start the party is a failure. The English guests keep to one side of the lawn and the Indians to the other, so the two groups never really mix. The English officials and their wives are cold and full of racial pride; Mrs Turton believes the Indians are inferior and should not be treated as equals. The Indian guests, nervous and humiliated, are patronised rather than welcomed. Only a few sincere people — Mrs Moore, Fielding and Adela — actually try to talk kindly with the Indians. The party fails because goodwill cannot survive in a system built on inequality: the English come to display power, not friendship. Forster uses this scene to satirize the Anglo-Indian community and to show, early in the novel, that official attempts to unite East and West are hollow and doomed.

Why does the relationship between Aziz and Fielding fail? — 🔥 Very likely (both years)

Aziz and Fielding begin as true friends: Fielding, unlike other Englishmen, treats Aziz as an equal and even risks his own career by supporting him during the trial. Yet their friendship slowly breaks down for several reasons. First, there is misunderstanding: after the trial, Aziz wrongly believes that Fielding is going to marry Adela Quested — the woman who nearly destroyed him — and this false rumour poisons his trust. Second, there is wounded pride and cultural distance: Aziz, deeply hurt by the injustice done to him, grows suspicious of all English people and turns towards Indian nationalism. Third, and most important, there is the political situation itself: as long as Britain rules India, an Englishman and an Indian cannot meet as complete equals, however much they like each other. In the last scene the two men are still fond of one another, but Aziz says that only when the English are driven out can they truly be friends. Forster's point is that empire, not personal fault, is what finally separates them.

Part C — Essays (15 marks)

"Comment on the British Raj in India in the novel *A Passage to India*." — 🔥 Very likely (both years, marked v.v.i.)

A Passage to India (1924) is one of the greatest English novels about colonial rule, and its deepest subject is the British Raj — the British government of India. E. M. Forster, who visited India twice, does not write a simple political pamphlet; instead he shows, through everyday scenes and human relationships, how empire twists the minds and hearts of both rulers and ruled. His thesis, dramatised across the whole novel, is that the Raj makes honest friendship between English and Indians almost impossible, because it is built on power and racial pride rather than on equality.

Forster first paints the ruling English community, the "Anglo-Indians," as cold and arrogant. Men like the Collector Mr Turton and the police superintendent McBryde believe firmly that Indians are inferior and must be kept in their place. The English gather in their exclusive Club, from which Indians are barred, and their wives — especially Mrs Turton — are even more contemptuous than the men. The famous Bridge Party, meant to "bridge the gulf" between the races, only proves how deep the gulf is: the two groups stand on opposite sides of the lawn and never truly meet. Through this satire Forster shows that the machinery of the Raj crushes ordinary human warmth.

Against this, Forster places characters who try to cross the racial line — Mrs Moore, Fielding and Adela — and shows how the system defeats them. Mrs Moore meets Aziz with simple kindness in the mosque, and Fielding befriends him as an equal; for a moment connection seems possible. But the caves incident destroys everything. The moment Adela accuses Aziz, the entire English community closes ranks, not around truth but around race. They assume Aziz is guilty simply because he is Indian and she is a white woman. Here Forster exposes one of the ugliest features of the Raj: the colonial myth that native men are a sexual danger to English women, a fear used to justify domination and injustice.

The trial scene is the political climax of the novel. The English treat the courtroom as a battle of races rather than a search for justice; they are outraged that an Indian should even be judged fairly. When Adela bravely tells the truth and withdraws her charge, the English feel betrayed rather than relieved. The critic Edward Said, in *Culture and Imperialism*, notes that Forster

clearly sees the injustice of empire, yet cannot quite imagine India ruling itself; his vision stops at the edge of the colonial world. Benita Parry, in *Delusions and Discoveries*, similarly shows how Forster both criticises imperial attitudes and remains partly shaped by them.

Finally, Forster judges the Raj through its effect on friendship. Aziz and Fielding genuinely love each other, but the poison of empire — suspicion, rumour, wounded pride — slowly drives them apart. In the last chapter Aziz cries that only when the British are thrown out of India can he and Fielding be friends. The very land answers the wish for friendship with "No, not yet," and the sky says "No, not there." Frederick Crews, in *The Perils of Humanism*, argues that the novel tests liberal goodwill and finds it too weak to overcome political power — and that is exactly Forster's verdict on the Raj.

In conclusion, Forster's portrait of the British Raj is subtle but damning. He does not shout slogans; he simply shows honest, likeable people made small and cruel by a system of racial rule. The Raj, in this novel, is not just bad government — it is a barrier that poisons love, justice and friendship, and it must fall before East and West can truly meet.

"Discuss Forster's use of symbolism in *A Passage to India*." — 🔥 Very likely (both years, marked v.v.i.)

Although *A Passage to India* tells a realistic story of colonial India, its lasting power comes from E. M. Forster's rich use of symbolism (প্রতীকবাদ). Forster believed that a great novel should have "rhythm" — recurring images that return like notes in music — and this novel is built exactly so. Symbols such as the Marabar Caves, the arching sky, the three religious buildings and the small wasp carry meanings far larger than the plot, turning a political story into a meditation on the whole universe. My argument is that Forster uses symbolism to raise the local question of the Raj into the universal question of whether human beings can ever find unity.

The central symbol is the Marabar Caves. They are ancient, dark and utterly empty — older than any religion or empire. Their most terrible feature is the echo: whatever you say inside, the cave returns the same dull sound, so that a prayer and an insult come back exactly alike. To Mrs Moore this echo whispers that "everything exists, nothing has value," and it destroys her Christian faith and her love of life. Wilfred Stone, in his study *The Cave and the Mountain*, reads the caves as the symbolic centre of the book — a vision of nothingness beneath all human meaning. Inside these caves the plot's disaster happens, so the symbol and the story are perfectly joined.

Balancing the caves is the great symbol of the sky. From the opening chapter Forster describes the huge, overarching sky that stretches over Chandrapore, dwarfing the little quarrels of men. The sky suggests both the smallness of human beings under the Raj and the possibility of a larger unity above all races and faiths. Malcolm Bradbury has noted how such repeated images give the novel a musical "rhythm," returning again and again to remind us of forces far bigger than the human characters.

The three-part structure is itself symbolic. The novel is divided into "Mosque," "Caves" and "Temple," matching the three great religions of India — Islam, a doubting Christianity, and Hinduism — and three moods: hope, despair and reconciliation (পুনর্মিলন). The Mosque is where Aziz and Mrs Moore first connect in gentle friendship. The Caves are where connection collapses into fear and emptiness. The Temple, set during a joyful Hindu festival of the birth of the god Krishna, offers a messy but generous embrace of all creation. Here even a comic misprinted banner reading "God si love" hints that human beings can never perfectly capture the divine, yet must keep trying.

Smaller symbols deepen these themes. The wasp, noticed first by Mrs Moore and later remembered by the Hindu Professor Godbole during his religious festival, becomes a symbol of Hindu inclusiveness — a faith that tries to embrace even the lowest creature. Water and the rains of the Temple section symbolise renewal after the dryness and heat of the caves. Even the horses and rocks of the final ride are symbolic, for they physically push Aziz and Fielding apart as if nature itself refuses their friendship. As Lionel Trilling observed, the real subject beneath the politics is the difficulty of human connection, and Forster's symbols carry that theme.

In conclusion, symbolism is not decoration in *A Passage to India*; it is the novel's very method of thought. The caves speak of a meaningless universe, the sky of a possible unity, the three buildings of humanity's search for God, and the wasp of a faith wide enough to hold everything. Through these patterns Forster lifts a story about the British Raj into a profound question about order, value and love in the world. That is why the novel is remembered as a masterpiece of modern symbolic fiction.

⚡ One-Page Revision Sheet

Revision Item	Content
Story in 3 lines	Mrs Moore and Adela come to British India; the kind Indian doctor Aziz befriends them and Fielding. On a trip to the Marabar Caves, Adela wrongly accuses Aziz of assault; he is tried and freed when she admits the truth. The scandal ruins trust between English and Indians, and Aziz's friendship with Fielding cannot survive under colonial rule.
2 must-quotes	(1) "Except for the Marabar Caves — and they are twenty miles off — the city of Chandrapore presents nothing extraordinary." (2) "Why can't we be friends now?" — answered by the land's "No, not yet" and the sky's "No, not there."
2 backup quotes	(1) "Everything exists, nothing has value." (Mrs Moore / the echo). (2) The festival banner "God si love" (Temple section).
2 critics	Edward Said (empire exposed but Indian freedom unimagined); Wilfred Stone (caves as the symbolic centre of nothingness).
Technique words	Symbolism, "rhythm" / leitmotif, three-part structure (Mosque–Caves–Temple), omniscient narrator, irony, free indirect discourse, landscape-as-symbol.
Top 3 likely essays	(1) British Raj in the novel (v.v.i., both years). (2) Forster's use of symbolism / part played by symbols (v.v.i., both years). (3) Justify the title / how separation is represented (both years).

Exam-timing tip: In a 4-hour paper, give the two 15-mark essays about 45–50 minutes each; spend the first 5 minutes making a quick plan (thesis + 4 points + 2 quotes + 1 critic) so your answer stays organised and finishes on time.