

Indian Social Structure in British Period

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ABSTRACT

The latter half of the eighteenth century witnessed the culmination of Mughal power and initiation of colonial rule in India. Colonial administration in India was introduced by the Treaty of Allahabad (Oct. 1765) by Robert Clive. Accordingly, a new model of Dual government was implemented through the Diwani rights (rights related with revenue collection) and Nizamat rights (rights related with military administration). From onwards, Indian society, economy and administration experienced two kinds of consequences; one positive impact and another one was negative. As we know, British interests were of several kinds. At first, the main purpose was to achieve a monopolistic trading position. Later it was felt that a regime of free trade would make India a major market for British goods and a source of raw materials. The British Raj was deeply directed for colonial economic exploitation of India through trade, industry and finance. Consequently, the Indian economy was subordinated to the British economy. India was transformed into a supplier of raw materials, a vast market for British manufactures and a field of investment for British capital. After 1813, the British imposed a policy of one-way free trade on India. The result was the ruination of Indian handicraft and cottage industries. While they collected high land revenue, the British rule did little to improve agriculture. The net result was the prevalence of extreme poverty in Indian society.

Keywords

Caste, Elite class, Female infanticide, Infant Mortality, Macaulay Minute, Sati

INTRODUCTION

Right from the beginning of their relationship with India, the British, who had come as traders and had become rulers and administrators, had influenced the economic and political structure of the country. Their impact on the cultural and social life of India was, however, gradual. Till

1813, they followed a policy of non-interference in the social and cultural life of the Indians. Yet, changes were taking place in particular fields as condition of women, the caste system and other social malpractices. The demand for social and religious reform that manifested itself in the early decades of the nineteenth century partly arose as a response to Western education and culture. Some British administrators were inspired by the liberal ideas popular in the West and tried to introduce them in India. This was reflected in some of the social legislation of the British government in India and in the introduction of modern education. The educational system was reorganized and it brought the educated people into contact with the modern ideas of democracy and nationalism. The beginning of the Press, in spite of the severe restrictions, played a vital role in spreading modern ideas among Indian society.

From the 1820s to the 1850s the British demonstrated a strong urge to change Indian social institutions and to Westernize India. As we know, according to the old Hindu law, a Brahmin murderer might not be put to death, while a Sudra who cohabited with a high-caste woman would automatically suffer execution (Kane, 1925). However, under the British regime, Brahmin and Sudra were liable to the same punishment for the same offence. At the same time, there was a strong streak of Benthamite radicalism in the East India Company administration. James Mill became a senior company official in 1819 after writing a monumental history of India which showed a strong contempt for Indian institutions. With new administrative and economic structures, a new middle class began to emerge in the Indian society. This exposure stimulated them to examine and analyze the ills of their own society. This elite class led to reformation and initiated campaigns against polytheism, animism, idolry, purdah, caste barriers, child-marriage, sati, etc. They termed these evils as elements of primitive or pre-modern identity. Emancipation of women dominated the agenda for social reform. They assumed that women's position was an excellent indicator of the advancement of a society.

OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

The present study is an attempt to examine and evaluate the outlook of British regime towards Indian social milieu. While observing the racist policy, the paper also narrates positive measures taken by the colonial government as the abolition of sati, ban on infanticide and granting the legal right to widows to remarry, provisions of education, etc.

METHODOLOGY

A descriptive research methodology has been used to assess the perception of British regime towards Indian society. The researcher has relied both on Primary sources as well as Secondary sources for collection of data. Primary data has been gathered from archival records; whereas Secondary data is based on analysis and discussions.

INDIAN SOCIETY AND CHANGES

Indian society underwent many changes after the British came to India. In Indian society, they abolished the production process that was prevalent in India before the advent of capitalism. With the establishment of new production systems or revenue generating mechanisms, there emerged new sections in Indian social web. These production systems or new tenancy structures were *Zamindari system* (Permanent Settlement) in Bengal, *Ryotwari system* in Madras and *Mahalwari system* in North India. Through these systems Colonial rule brutally destroyed the agrarian pattern in India. Consequently, a new class called Zamindars (landlords) came into existence; which proved instrumental in the extension of British rule in India. The colonial rulers did not allowed accumulation of capital in their colonies as they wished to transfer it to their mother country. Therefore, they made use of official power to destroy all the handicraft and works of skill that produced wealth in India.

At the same time, British in India diverted all sources of income towards unproductive expenditure like hostilities, victories, expansion of territories, making war alliances, etc. It is a well accepted historical fact that the British Raj had a deeply racist aspect. Many Englishmen adopted the tone of racial superiority in their dealings with Indians, irrespective of their caste, religion, province or class with the badge of inferiority. They were kept out of the important offices in both civil and military administration. In judicial set up, a hateful and frequent policy of racial arrogance was adopted to demoralise Indians. It is said that the testimony of a single Englishmen had more weight in the court than that of any number of Indians (Cohn,

1966; Beer, 1962). This had put a terrible instrument of power into the hands of an unscrupulous Englishmen. The Indian were kept out of European clubs and were often not permitted to travel in the same compartment in a train with the European passengers. In the nineteenth century, certain social practices like a rigid caste system, female infanticide, child marriage, sati and polygamy became more prevalent in society (Ambedkar, 1946). These practices were against human dignity and values. Women were discriminated on all stages of life and were considered as the most disadvantaged section of the society. They did not have access to any development opportunities to improve their status. Education was limited to a handful of men belonging to the upper castes. Brahmins had access to the Vedas, which were written in Sanskrit.

The priestly class outlined expensive rituals, sacrifices and practices, after birth or death. When the British came to India, they brought new ideas such as liberty, equality, freedom and human rights evoked by various movements in Europe as the Renaissance, the Reformation, etc. These ideas appealed to some sections of our society and led to several reform movements in different parts of the country. The biggest change the British made in the social structure was to replace the warlord aristocracy by an efficient bureaucracy and army. The traditional system of the East India Company was supposed to pay its servants fairly modest salaries and to let them augment their income from private transaction (Bagchi, 2000). This arrangement worked reasonably well before the conquest of Bengal, but was inefficient as a way of remunerating the officials of a substantial territorial Empire because of two reasons. Firstly, too much of the profit went into private hands rather than the Company's officers, and secondly, an over rapacious short-term policy was damaging the productive capacity of the economy and likely to drive the local population to revolt, both of which were against the Company's longer-term interests (Stokes, 1978). To tackle the situation Clive had operated a 'dual' system in Bengal, i.e. Company power and a puppet Nawab. Warren Hastings, Governor of Bengal, (1772-85) displaced the Nawab and took over direct administration, but retained Indian officials. Finally, in 1786, Cornwallis (1786-93) created a professional cadre of Company servants who had generous salaries, had no private trading of production interests in India, enjoyed the prospect of regular promotion and were entitled to pensions (Berce, 1982). All administrative high-level posts were reserved for the British, and Indians were excluded.

One of the most significant equipment the British did to Westernize India was to introduce a modified version of English education. Macaulay's Minute (2nd February, 1835) on Education had a decisive impact on British educational policy and is a classic example of a Western rationalist approach to Indian civilization (Johannes, 1996). Here, it is mention worthy to narrate that this new education infrastructure was not meant for the masses. As Macaulay himself said that, *"It is impossible for us, with our limited means, to educate the body of the people. We must at present do our best to form a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern; a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect. To that class we may leave it to refine the vernacular dialects of the country, to enrich those dialects with terms of science borrowed from the Western nomenclature, and to render them by degrees fit vehicles for conveying knowledge to the great mass of the population."* India's contact with the West forced educated Indians to think that socio-religious reform was a prerequisite for the all-round development of the country (Charles, 1964; Kenneth, 1994). Educated Indians like Raja Rammohan Roy worked systematically to eradicate social evils. A period of social reforms began in India during the time of Governor General Lord William Bentinck (1828-35) who was helped by Rammohan Roy. In 1829, Sati or the practice of burning a widow with her dead husband was made illegal or punishable by law. Female infanticide was banned. With Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar's assistance, the Widow Remarriage Act was passed by Lord Dalhousie (1848-56) in 1856. Vidyasagar also campaigned against child marriage and polygamy. The cruel custom of offering little children as sacrifice to please God, practiced by certain tribes, was banned by Governor General Lord Harding (1910-16). It is important to note that since the reform movement started in Bengal, its impact was first felt here and later on it spread all over India. Until 1857, the East India Company was unable to destroy traditional Indian society and westernize the county. But proactive British policies and the attempt to extend British rule by taking over native states provoked both the Hindu and Muslim communities to participate actively in the rebellion of 1857 (Grover, 1998; Alavi, 1998). With the end of this fierce rebellion, British policy towards Indian institutions and society became much more conservative. The Macaulay Minute created a new elite class in India, which functioned according to their needs and demands. This new elite established a Western life-style using the English language and English schools. New towns and urban amenities were created with segregated suburbs and housing for them. Their habits were copied by the new

professional classes as of lawyers, doctors, teachers, journalists and businessmen. Within this group, old cast barriers were eased and social mobility increased.

The existence of Indian women, as independent individuals, was always denied on the basis of customary practices and traditions. However, it was only towards the colonial period that women's question began to receive attention. India's encounter with the notion of liberalism occurred as a result of its contact with colonial rule and subsequently formed part of nationalist discourse. Radha Kumar refers nineteenth century an age of women; when it was felt that time has come for women to unite and strive towards a set goal of men and women enjoining equal status (Kumar, 1993). The first and foremost social problem that attracted British administrators and Indian social reformers was the need for a better position for women in social configuration. There core areas were the abolition of the cruel rite of sati and female infanticide, popularization of widow remarriage, condemnation of child marriage and polygamy, abolition of purdha system and fostering provisions of education facilities for women. Furthermore, Indian education was of predominantly literacy character and the provision for technical training was negligible. Education for girls was almost totally ignored throughout the nineteenth century.

Because higher education was in English, there was no official effort to translate Western literature into the vernacular, nor was there any procedure of standardization of Indian scripts. Primary education was not taken very seriously as a government obligation and was financed largely by the weak local authorities. In the mid of the nineteenth century, Calcutta became an intellectual and early centre for the emancipation of women. Most of the notable campaigns were launched from Calcutta by a developing intelligentsia. First of them was, Henry V. Derozio, a young Anglo-Indian, who was deeply inspired by the ideas of liberty and equality propounded by the French revolution. Raja Ram Mohan Roy led the campaign against sati which was the first women's issue to receive public attention (Chaudhuri, 2011). His determined struggle for the abolition of sati is referred as milestone in the reform programme intended for emancipation of women. Ram Mohan Roy also established Atmiya Sabha (1815), which was instrumental in spreading education among Indian women. Similarly, in the early 1850s Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar launched a campaign for widow remarriage. Dayanand Saraswati's Arya Samaj also worked towards betterment of women's lives by advocating widow remarriage and education (Fuller, 1900; Chaudhuri, 1988). Eminent social reformer,

Dhondi Karve worked for the widowhood reform movement. In the late nineteenth century, Behram Malabari initiated campaign against child marriage and the argument forwarded was that child marriages resulted in the debilitation of the race. First attempts to reform prostitutes were made by Michael Madhusudan Datta, a member of the young Bengali group, who proposed to rehabilitate them by turning them into actresses.

Another major anxiety in Indian families in colonized period was the high rate of infant mortality. In the Bengal presidency between 1860 and 1869, the average death rate was about 148 per thousand British children under the age of five, while in England during the same period the mortality rate was about 67 per thousand. The grief of losing children was expressed by British mothers. Maria Amelia Vansittart, wife of a Civil Session judge in northern India, noted in her diary on 26th March 1846, that between eight and nine in the evening a very little girl was born, and in the entry of April 13th she described her daughter's burial. Theon Wilkinson, who studied tombstones in India, documented the repeated misfortunes of some families.

CONCLUSION

The British rule created a vast mass of landless peasants. The movement of the landless labourers for tenancy rights and against the exploitation began to surface with the expansion and extension of British Empire (Desai, 2000). In the initial phase of their rule, British Raj did not initiate any programme for the progress and welfare of the people. They did not pay any attention to the progress in the field of agriculture, industry, judiciary, education and social reforms. For the purpose of extension of Colonial rule continuously British administrators introduced some additional supporting reforms. As a result, a number of socio-economic and other administrative reforms were introduced in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. However, the reason for this was quite different. It was thought that India should progress on the lines of their motherland and ultimately it will lead to consolidation of British rule in India. Lord Cornwallis (1786-93), Wellesley (1798-1805), Dalhousie (1848-56) and Curzon (1898-1905) ruled with anti-Indian sentiments and they preferred Indians to low rank scale service in colonial government.

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