

BRITISH COLONIALISM AND RELIGIOUS CHANGE IN INDIA

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ABSTRACT

British colonialism fundamentally reshaped India's religious and social landscape through institutional interventions, missionary expansion, and the codification of traditions. [1, 2]

Key Drivers of Religious and Social Change

- **Missionary Expansion:** The Charter Act of 1813 legally opened India to Christian missionaries, shifting initial East India Company neutrality toward active educational, medical, and social outreach. [1, 2]
- **Socio-Religious Reform Movements:** Western ideals of rationalism, liberty, and human rights inspired native reformers—such as Raja Ram Mohan Roy (founder of the Brahmo Samaj) and Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar—to challenge traditional practices like sati, child marriage, and idolatry. [1, 2]
- **Codification and Categorization:** The colonial state cataloged castes, faiths, and personal laws, which rigidified fluid traditional identities and institutionalized distinct communal boundaries. [1, 2, 3]
- **Revivalist Backlash:** Unabashed conversion efforts and cultural shifts sparked defensive and assertive responses, leading to the rise of organizations like the Arya Samaj and various indigenous cultural revival movements. [1, 2]

Keywords- British Colonialism, religious, social change, India, reform

INTRODUCTION

In 1947, British India was divided into two dominions: India – a secular state with a predominantly Hindu population – and Muslim Pakistan. The partition was carried out in accordance with the “Mountbatten Plan” on the basis of the religious affiliation of millions of inhabitants of the former colony (Schmidt, 122). The context here was a sharp confrontation between the Hindus, Sikhs, and Muslims who inhabited British India, which was further fueled by the British (Bloomberg Quicktake: Originals: Why India's Mix of Nationalism and Religion Can Be Deadly, 3:55). Thus, the implementation of the “Mountbatten plan” only confirmed the significant influence of the religious factor in determining the political and socio-economic future of India (Schmidt, 122). However, while one can argue that historical religious practices, indeed, deeply affect Indian society even today, British colonialism still had a more prominent impact on it.[1,2,3]

Hinduism has a significant influence on the everyday life of an orthodox Hindu: on his thinking, behavior, and value orientations. The ancient Indian treatises Dharma-Shastras contain a set of rules of conduct for every Hindu who cannot neglect the performance of the rites that are mandatory for his caste. Dharma, or the rites and rituals of the upper and middle castes, differ from the dharma of the lower castes and untouchables. The caste system strictly regulated the social order of ancient India (Khan Academy: Varnas and the Caste System, 0:10). Although the caste system is abolished by the Indian Constitution, in real life, it continues to persist almost everywhere (Bloomberg Quicktake: Originals: The Man Challenging India's Caste System, 1:23). Therefore, it should be noted that religion has a prominent place in the Indian society even though India is a secular state.

The beginning of the reformation of Hinduism and thus the Indian social order, however, was laid by the activity of the Bengali thinker R. M. Roy (1772-1833) in the nineteenth century – the first half of the twentieth century. In Hinduism, there was a whole complex of phenomena connected with the reformation process, but ultimately, it was majorly led by British colonialism. The motive was the British conquest and establishment of the East India Company and the British crown in power (TRT World: India's Colonial History, 1:20). The transformation of India into a modern economy began as the railways, canals, roads, and other structures were established (Daily Dose Documentary: British Imperialism in India, 2:34). Then, the spread of the culture and religion of the British occurred, which influenced the representatives of the higher castes – the Brahmins and Kshatriyas, the landed aristocracy, and the priestly elite.

Under these conditions, the first attempts to reform Hinduism began to be made through the influence of Western standards. For example, according to the appeals of the reformers, the colonial authorities banned the cruel custom of sati – the self-immolation of widows, persecuted the murder of newborn girls, and limited child marriages. Missionaries intensified their activity in converting representatives of the lower castes and untouchables to Christianity, which posed a direct threat to the priesthood (Jeffrey, 163). Members of the higher strata of the Hindu community began to show interest in Christianity and Western liberal ideas (Jeffrey, 164). After India gained independence in 1947, it began to form a centrally planned economy to compete with regional and global leaders (Global Economics: The Indian Economy- Next Big Shot?, 1:30). The society transformed from a religion-led order to a more structured one, based on the distribution of power between dedicated non-religiously affiliated branches.[4,5,6]

DISCUSSION

British colonialism played a major role in shaping contemporary India. While its influence is largely considered controversial, it still led Indian society through a set of important reformations and changes. While historical religious practices such as Hinduism continue to remain highly relevant to society, their influence has been steadily decreasing among the majority of the now diversified population. Thus, it can be concluded that British colonialism had a more significant impact on the development of India than native religion.

The cultural legacy of India emanates from its five-thousand-year-old elegance and enhancement. It goes without saying that this cultural heritage has had a profound influence on the global cultural panorama. People from diverse communities, expressing in distinctive languages, consuming a variety of nourishments, and carrying out different rituals amicably co-occur in harmony in India, as epitomized by the Indian 'Sanskriti.' Consequently, India's cultural heritage is defined by its diverse array of faiths, traditions, customs, and beliefs. Moreover, India has evolved various forms of art, architecture, and ideas through the years, and this richness has made Indian culture unrivaled, to which almost everyone still gazes. Thus, India's cultural heritage continues to thrive, retaining its original characteristics while adapting to changes, an attribute that remains a primary source of its resilience.[6,7,8]

Prevailing Indian ethos is an upshot of interaction and intricate blend of historical mores, colonial stimuli throughout spans, and inculcation of existing Western culture. Western writers recurrently overlook key facets of Indian ethos and customs and their multiplicity. In their standardized renderings of India, the deep-seated conglomeration of Indian traditions in distinctive expanses of India is lost. Monuments and art assemblages are not the sole instances of heritage. Intoned traditions, performing arts, religious and cultural commemorations, and traditional artistry are illustrations of living expressions inherited from predecessors and conceded to posterities. Since it is a crucial element in maintaining cultural diversity in the face of mounting globalization, this indescribable cultural heritage is subtle and compels protection and understanding. It has been dynamic and inclusive because it promotes societal solidity, fosters a sense of belonging, and helps preserve group identities. Its cultural pluralism is embedded in a web of interconnectedness. A single religion or culture can't survive exclusively. Today India is a vast and vital nation, a large industrial economy with geostrategic significance. Cosmopolitan urban India and traditional rural India strive simultaneously to build a bright future.

It is known to all that the extraordinary history of India is inextricably linked to its geography. Despite its natural exclusion and alluring religions, it has always been an aggressor's bliss. These intrusions have empowered it to adapt to and

absorb numerous people who have permeated its mountainous terrain and passes. No matter how many Persians, Greeks, Arabs, Portuguese, French, British, and other raiders decimated the land, local kings and kingdoms invariably survived, living out their conquest and collapse sagas. All through this phase, these local dynasties were building on the foundations of a culture that existed since the genesis of the Indian civilization. In the words of Swami Vivekanand:

History itself bears testimony to the fact. All the soul-elevating ideas and the different branches of knowledge that exist in the world are found on a proper investigation to have their roots in India. (qtd. in "Shri. Priya Nath Sinha").

II British Colonization of India before 1857[8,9,10]

England established the East India Company in 1600 to control trade with India. The East India Company established a factory at Surat in 1610. This tiny base marked the commencement of a peculiar presence that would last over three hundred years and eventually dominate the entire subcontinent. According to the American historian Will Durant:

The British conquest of India was the invasion and destruction of a high civilization by a trading company [the British East India Company] utterly without scruple or principle, careless of art and greedy of gain, over-running with fire and sword a country temporarily disordered and helpless, bribing or murdering, annexing and stealing, and beginning that career of illegal and 'legal' plunder which has now [1930] gone on ruthlessly for one hundred and seventy-three years. (qtd. in Tharoor's *Inglorious Empire* 38).

The battles of Plassey (1757) and Buxar (1764) laid the basis for the British conquest of India. Victory in various wars helped solidify the British position. However, many native states fell under British control due to the Doctrine of Lapse and Subsidiary Alliance systems. Lord Wellesley, the Governor-General (1798-1805), used the Subsidiary Alliance System as a "Non- Intervention Policy" to establish the British Empire in India. Every ruler in India was required to pay a subsidy to the British for the upkeep of the British army. The British promised

to protect them from their enemies in exchange, offering the British with opportunity for enormous expansion.

Similarly, to address the succession problem of Hindu states, Lord Dalhousie devised and implemented the Doctrine of Lapse. The policy stated that a ruler who had accepted or was in an alliance with the Britishers would lose his territory if he died without an heir. It also said that Britishers would decide whether or not the ruler was competent, and if not, his territory would be taken away. Such policies overthrew India's long-held 'hereditary' succession policy as the sole criterion for throne succession. Thus, the Doctrine of Lapse was an essential and implicit question that stimulated the revolt of 1857.[9,10]

In opposition to British rule, the Indian Revolt of 1857 brought together people of various ethnic, religious, and social backgrounds. The revolt brought the East India Company's hegemony to an end. British rule had a significant impact on Indian society, economy, and culture between 1757 and 1857. A merchant, a ruler, and a Christian missionary were among the British government's errands in India. Initially, due to the threat of revolt, the British East India Company maintained a policy of non-interference in religious and educational matters of India. Charles Grant, a British East India Company junior officer, believed that the British could establish absolute hegemony in India by demonstrating the West's higher ethical values based on Christian heritage. He asserted that religious ideas were entrenching people's ignorance in India and that it could be changed by spreading Christian traditions. As a result, he sought the Company's official approval before beginning his missionary work. The Charter Act of 1813 was finally enacted by the British Parliament. It stipulated that permission would be granted to Missionaries who wanted to preach religion in India. The Charter of 1833 made provisions for the permanent presence of missionaries in India. Since then, the colonial rulers and missionaries protected and promoted each other with a renewed zeal.

The British rule provided the missionaries with a favorable atmosphere and infrastructure to work. In India, they prompted social and legal reforms. As a result, William Bentick issued a resolution in 1835 to promote European studies while also allocating funds to English education. It was admitted that studying Indian and Oriental works was in vain. Customs, traditions, and religious beliefs were thought to be pointless. The introduction of English education was the only solution. Alexander Duff, a Scottish missionary, was tasked with putting an end to idol worship and obscurantism. It gained more converts as a result of mass movements among the social and economic classes most affected by the existing social and economic order. They were unable to comprehend other

cultures and religions due to their belief in European Civilization's supremacy. Their presence, on the other hand, sparked a spate of social movements that ultimately led to social reforms in India. Mass Hindu conversions shattered Native Indians' soul and self-respect, resulting in the deterioration of Indian culture. Subsequently, an education policy was construed for India in such a fashion that would lure Indians to engage as clerks for low wages in addition to creating a class of Indians who were loyal to the British, applauded their culture, and connived to increase market share for British goods.

RESULTS

Educational institutions aiming to brainwash the minds of children and instil a feeling of subordination and superior British presence on the Indian subcontinent were formed to spread the so-called modern rational education. The colonists wanted to educate the Indians just enough to work for their requirements. They did not encourage an analytical thought process. Indians were made to believe about their primitivity and ignorance, whereas India had been a glorious civilization with the values of nonviolent co-existence and cultural pluralism. Despite being a seat of glorious achievements in knowledge, architecture, and arts, India was reverted to being a poor importer due to ruthless economic exploitation. English were ruling us with guns. Everybody wore Indian clothes and bought Indian textiles. The truth remains that the Europeans ruled us with their might. Before colonization, the Europeans spent sixty percent of their wealth buying Indian textiles. The Britishers, as rulers in India, made a systematic effort to destroy Indian textiles. They made a law that it could be sold only to the East India Company. Indian export of clothes came down. All industry was destroyed, and most of the Indian population fell back on agriculture for subsistence.[10,11]

We have suffered as a country as a result of self-criticism, which began with modern- day education. More drastic changes are required in the British-created educational system. There is a need for a complete transformation of the educational concept. In the future, intellectual ability and sharpness of interpretation will be more valuable than memory strength. As a result, education should not be designed to produce elites. The British education system was designed to instil the value of obedience rather than promote intelligence.

Winston Churchill's often expressed quote depicts the colonial mindset:

I hate Indians. They are a beastly people with a beastly religion . . . Let the Viceroy sit on the back of a giant elephant and trample Gandhi into the dirt. (qtd. in Tharoor's *An Era of Darkness* 358).

CONCLUSION

India gained independence in 1947 but at a significant cost leading to the partition of the country. Britain also aided in the solidification and perpetuation of the iniquities of the caste system in India. In addition, religion was used to divide and rule, fostering a two-nation theory that eventually divided the country and made partition inevitable; one million people were killed, and seventeen million were displaced during the partition. (Bacchetta 566) Nonetheless, Indian youth need to acknowledge the fact that the decades of self-abnegation has not aided progress. So perhaps now is the time to bolster our self-confidence.[11]

India is a diverse country with a diverse population. What is it that binds this diverse group of people together? This country's cultural framework holds it together as a whole. The cultural threads bind Indians together as a people. What steps should be taken to revitalize this culture? Culture is a naturally ensuing entity. Today's societal trends lead us to emulate Western culture, regarded as superior. But we must appreciate the importance of our culture. The world has a wide range of cultures. Since ancient times, Indian culture has been designed to lead people to the spiritual process. Every activity was designed to help people grow spiritually. However, few essential practices, such as Yoga, have been ingrained in people's daily lives. It is critical to be educated about the significance of these practices that we have been practicing for thousands of years, such as touching the feet of our elders. It is time to reintroduce our traditions and values into our daily lives. It is time to surf our roots and pass this knowledge on to future generations through education. We need to persuade people to abandon the erroneous belief that Indians are inferior, uneducated people who must imitate the West. We must combine the best aspects of both cultures. Both lifestyles have advantages and disadvantages, and we must find a way to bridge the gap. This is to optimize our lives and be better human beings by reviving our customs with proper reasoning.[12]

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