

A STUDY ON SOCIAL CHANGES IN BRITISH TIME

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INTRODUCTION

Around the 18th Century a number of significant events took place in the world. One such event was the Industrial Revolution which took place in England. It gradually spread to other countries of Europe also. You must have read about the Industrial Revolution that took place in England, and also read about the discovery of new sea and trade routes. One such sea route to India was discovered by a Portuguese called Vasco de Gama in 1498. As a result, the English, French, Portuguese and the Dutch came to India for trade. They also used it to spread missionary activities in India.¹ The European and the British traders initially came to India for trading purposes. The Industrial Revolution in Britain led to the increase in demand for raw materials for the factories there. At the same time, they also required a market to sell their finished goods. India provided such a platform to Britain to fulfill all their needs. The 18th century was a period of internal power struggle in India and with the declining power of the Mughal Empire, the British officials were provided with the perfect opportunity to establish their hold over Indian Territory. They did these through numerous wars, forced treaties, annexations of and alliances with the various regional powers all over the country. Their new administrative and economic policies helped them consolidate their control over the country. Their land revenue policies help them keep the poor farmers in check and get huge sums as revenues in return. They forced the commercialisation of agriculture with the growing of various cash crops and the raw-materials for the industries in the Britain. With the strong political control, the British were able to monopolise the trade with India

BRITISH IMPACT ON SOCIETY

Indian society underwent many changes after the British came to India. In the 19th century, certain social practices like female infanticide, child marriage, sati, polygamy and a rigid caste system became more prevalent. These practices were against human dignity and values. Women were discriminated against at all stages of life and were the 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. Expensive rituals, sacrifices and practices after birth or death were outlined by the priestly class. When the British came to India, they brought new ideas such as liberty, equality, freedom and human rights from the Renaissance, the Reformation Movement and the various revolutions that took place in Europe. These ideas appealed to some sections of our society and led to several reform movements in different parts of the country. At the forefront of these movements were visionary Indians such as Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Sir Syed Ahmed Khan, Aruna Asaf Ali and Pandita Ramabai. These movements looked for social unity and strived towards liberty, equality and fraternity. Many legal measures were introduced to improve the status of women. For example, the practice of sati was banned in 1829 by Lord Bentinck and then Governor General. Widow Remarriage was permitted by a law passed in 1856. A law passed in 1872, sanctioned inter-caste and inter-communal marriages. Sharda Act was passed in 1929 preventing child marriage. The act provided that it was illegal to marry a girl below 14 and a boy below 18 years. All the movements severely criticized the caste system and especially the practice of untouchability.²

Social and Cultural Policy

The British had come to India with the idea of making immense profits. This meant buying of raw materials at very cheap rates and selling finished goods at much higher prices. The British wanted the Indians to be educated and modern enough to consume their goods but

not to the extent that it proved detrimental to British interests. Some of the Britishers believed that Western ideas were modern and superior, while Indian ideas were old and inferior. This was, of course not true. Indians had a rich traditional learning that was still relevant. By this time in England there was a group of Radicals who had a humanistic ideology towards Indians. They wanted India to be a part of the modern, progressive world of science. But the British government was cautious in undertaking rapid modernisation of India. They feared a reaction among the people if too much interference took place with their religious beliefs and social customs. The English wanted perpetuation of their rule in India and not a reaction among the people. Hence, though they talked about introducing reforms, in reality very few measures were taken and these were also half-hearted.³

Education Policy

The British took a keen interest in introducing the English language in India. They had many reasons for doing so. Educating Indians in the English language was a part of their strategy. The Indians would be ready to work as clerks on low wages while for the same work the British would demand much higher wages. This would reduce the expenditure on administration. It was also expected to create a class of Indians who were loyal to the British and were not able to relate to other Indians. This class of Indians would be taught to appreciate the culture and opinion of the British. In addition, they would also help to increase the market for British goods. They wanted to use education as a means to strengthen their political authority in the world. Indians would spread English culture to the masses and that they would be able to rule through this class of educated Indians. The British gave jobs to only those Indians who knew English thereby compelling many Indians to go in for English education. Education soon became a monopoly of the rich and the city dwellers. The spread of English language and western education helped Indians to adopt modern, rational, democratic, liberal and patriotic outlook. New fields of knowledge in science, humanities and literature open to them. English became the lingua franca of the educated people in India. It

united them and gradually made them politically conscious of their rights. It also gave opportunity to the Indians to study in England and learn about the working of democratic institutions there. The writings of John Locke, Ruskin, Mill, Rousseau and many others instilled in them the ideas of liberty, equality, fraternity, human rights and self-government. The French and the American Revolutions, and the unifications of Italy and Germany further strengthened their appreciation of these ideas. Cavour, Garibaldi and Mazzini became their favorite heroes. They began to aspire for these ideals for India.⁴

British Administration

The Indians found it difficult to adjust to the new system of administration introduced by the British. The Indians were denied political rights and the British officers treated them with contempt. Indians were excluded from all higher positions in the civil administration and military. The British also introduced a new system of law and justice in India. A hierarchy of civil and criminal courts was established. The laws were codified and attempts were also made to separate the judiciary from the executive. Efforts were made to establish the 'Rule of Law' in India. But this only helped the British to enjoy arbitrary powers and to interfere with the rights and liberties of the Indians.⁵

Reorganization of Indian Civil Service

The Indian Civil Service was carefully built up during the British rule into a powerful and efficient bureaucratic force. In the last decade of Eighteenth Century, Cornwallis set himself to purity and reorganized the administration and filled all the key posts with men from Britain with the gradual march of time other more specialized services were established and the Public Works Department, Indian Police Service, Indian Forest Service, Indian Medical Service followed each other in succession.⁶ Thus, the British authorities' undertook the process of converting India into a modern state. The present Indian administrative system is a legacy of the British rule.

References

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