



# Philanthropy During Victorian Era In Great Britain.

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## Abstract

This paper explores the intricate landscape of philanthropy in Victorian Britain, a period marked by profound social and economic transformation. The study examines the motivations, mechanisms, and impacts of philanthropic activities during the 19th century, highlighting how the convergence of religious, moral, and social ideals fuelled charitable endeavors. Through a detailed analysis of key figures, institutions, and movements, the paper investigates how philanthropy became a vehicle for addressing poverty, education, and public health issues, while also reinforcing social hierarchies. The research delves into the role of women in philanthropic work, the influence of industrialization, and the ways in which charitable practices both challenged and perpetuated the status quo. By contextualizing Victorian philanthropy within broader historical and cultural shifts, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of the complex interplay between charity, social reform, and the construction of modern British society.

## Background

Philanthropy became a part of feudal system during the period of Roman Empire around 1601. But it was during 19<sup>th</sup> Century that they started being run through the foundation and it became more organised. There were also companies some organizations that required membership and with the help of the donations by the middle and upper classes, the lower classes were benefitted.

There also some charity based movements that came into existence. With the emergence of the nation-State, before and during this time period, poverty and social welfare slowly started becoming something that became a part of the law, of the state and the law of the nation.

## Historical Context

1. **Industrial Revolution:** The Victorian era saw England undergo profound economic and social changes due to the Industrial Revolution. Rapid urbanization led to crowded and unsanitary living conditions for many, which highlighted the need for social reform and charitable intervention.
2. **Social Reform Movements:** The rise of social reform movements during the Victorian era, including the temperance movement, anti-slavery campaigns, and education reforms, set the stage for a heightened focus on philanthropy. Reformers often sought to address the root causes of poverty and inequality.
3. **Religious and Moral Influences:** Many Victorians were motivated by religious beliefs, particularly those of Evangelical Christianity, which emphasized the moral duty to help the less fortunate. This moral imperative was a driving force behind various philanthropic efforts.

## State's role in offering Charities.

The State started advocating reforms and all aid were tried to be given to the people who were poor. The duties of the government also started increasing in this manner. The British government also started to monitor the efforts of these organisations. The civic and religious structures also started caring for the poor. The inclusion of social sciences in the efforts of the philanthropy added and supported by effort.

## Role of the Church.

The wealthy people started giving and helping people on the special day that was known as the Christian Duty Day.

Victorian Era charities were something that was an act that will help people to save their doomed souls.

## In the literary works of Charles Dickens.

What would Charles Dickens have written about, if poverty and philanthropy had not been such an essential feature of Victorian Britain? Philanthropists appeared throughout his novels, not just as a dramatic device to offer hope to the impoverished characters but also as a subject in their own right. His novels capture the contradictions of the Victorian Era philanthropy- the enormous need for generosity in an age where poverty and plenty literally rubbed shoulders and the inadequacy of so much of the charity actually provided. Some of his characters play a positive role like Mr. Brownlow in Oliver Twist, the Cheeryble brothers in Nicholas Nickleby and Mr and Mrs Garland in The Old Curiosity Shop. But philanthropists are sometimes also ridiculed in some of his works. In a novel mainly attacking the legal

system, Mrs. Jellyby and Mrs Pardiggle in Bleak House are respectively guilty of 'telescopic Philanthropy' and benevolence neither of them help to save the life of Jo, a child who dies of pneumonia. In his final unfinished novel "The Mystery of Edwin Drood" Charles Dickens ridicules the selfish, paternalist attitude to philanthropy that even today colours our perception of the Victorians taking a direct swipe at the leading philanthropic body of the time, 'The Charity Organisation Society.' The Character Mr. Honey thunders "Haven of Philanthropy" would have been unmistakable to the readers of the day as a parody of the COS or Cringe or Starved' as it was known by the critics.

Dickens knew what he was talking about, having been philanthropic adviser to Angela Burdett Coutts (1814-1906) at one time "the richest heiress in all England Many schools for poor children were established by her.

But the middle Victorian Britain was undergoing dramatic change. Liverpool grew from a large village of four thousand two hundred and forty population to a booming two fifty thousand people between 1860's to 1880's. With the massive migration to the cities came new social problems. As the public and philanthropic infrastructure could not keep up. A Royal Commission on the Poor Law was established in 1832 in response to the Swing Riots of 1830 where the agricultural labourers smashed the new threshing machines that were threatening their livelihoods. The commission collected evidence from 3000 parishes demonstrating that the Poor Law was poorly administered. The act abolished direct payment to the poor the speenhamland system of 'Outdoor relief'.

Education as we know was seen as a popular cause. The Metropolitan Association for improving the Dwelling of the Industrious Classes was founded to build new homes for the poor. This was also the period when some of the Britain's leading charities were formed. For example: The national Society for the prevention of Cruelty to Children. The rise of a different urban middle class also played a role. The Times newspaper of that time in London claimed that the income of London charities was greater than the governments of some European countries.

The great divide in philanthropy was over whether to respond to immediate need, risking creating dependency or to only help the deserving was gripping. Rich industrialists started to develop their own schemes of what is now called the corporate social responsibility to address the social ills of the time. Similar schemes were adopted at the end 19th century by most of the prominent industries like Cadburys and Rowntrees.

## So how did Philanthropy fall from such a high in Victorian age?

Firstly even as philanthropy reached new heights so it became apparent that it was not ready for the scale of the challenges it had to face. The London COS could provide caseworkers to help 800 people a year but this was only scratching the surface in a country where up to 1.75 million people were unemployed.

Secondly economic circumstances were changing with rapidity. Mass Irish immigration into cities like Liverpool, gave rise to unprecedented poverty creating huge slums in the city. Britain's economic power was also beginning to be challenged by the competitions from other European countries and the New World. A long economic depression hit UK in 1870's to 1880's. which stretched the Victorian welfare system beyond its limits.

Thirdly by the end of 19th century the debate on poverty had started to move on. Now the old economics, which blamed 'excess wages' as the cause of idleness was being undermined by Alfred Marshall. His revolutionary concept of unemployment made poverty as a product of the economic environment rather than the moral degeneration of the poor themselves.

Finally the change was coming through new political movement. Trade union dominated movement started to gather support in the common cause with the Liberal Party. Fear of political unrest pushed the traditional ruling classes towards social programmes to ease the pressure.

These new state commitments to the welfare of the poorer classes were expensive and were funded by higher rates of income tax, including a supertax on the highest earners and increased a new tax on the land. Government was taking on responsibility for the provision of basic services as a right of the citizen not as a favour. Philanthropy did not die out rapidly but rising taxes and an ever-encroaching state slowly sapped the strength of the movement.

## Key Figures and Organizations

1. **Josephine Butler:** A prominent social reformer, Butler worked tirelessly to improve the lives of women and children. She campaigned against the Contagious Diseases Acts, which were discriminatory towards women, and promoted social reforms.
2. **Florence Nightingale:** Known for her pioneering work in nursing during the Crimean War, Nightingale also contributed to philanthropic efforts by improving hospital conditions and advocating for healthcare reform.
3. **Charles Dickens:** Although primarily known as a novelist, Dickens used his writing to highlight social injustices and promote philanthropic causes. His works, such as "Oliver Twist" and "A Christmas Carol," raised awareness about the plight of the poor and influenced public opinion.

4. **The Charity Organization Society (COS):** Founded in 1869, COS aimed to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of charitable efforts by coordinating various organizations and focusing on systematic approaches to aid the poor.
5. **The Salvation Army:** Established in 1865 by William Booth, the Salvation Army provided practical assistance to the poor and sought to address social issues through religious and charitable work.

## Success and Impact

1. **Social Reforms:** Philanthropic efforts during the Victorian era contributed to significant social reforms, including improvements in public health, education, and housing. Initiatives such as the Factory Acts, which improved working conditions, and the Education Acts, which expanded access to education, were influenced by the philanthropic spirit of the time.
2. **Improved Social Services:** Charitable organizations established during the Victorian era laid the groundwork for modern social services. Efforts to provide relief, support for the elderly, and education for the disadvantaged became more structured and widespread.
3. **Public Awareness:** Philanthropy also played a role in raising public awareness about social issues. Literature, media campaigns, and public speeches helped to highlight the challenges faced by the poor and marginalized, fostering a culture of social responsibility.
4. **Long-Term Influence:** The philanthropic practices and organizations of the Victorian era influenced future charitable endeavors and laid the foundation for the modern welfare state. Many of the principles and approaches developed during this time continue to inform contemporary philanthropy and social reform efforts.

Overall, philanthropy during the Victorian era was both a response to immediate social needs and a catalyst for long-term social change. It reflected a growing awareness of social responsibilities and contributed to shaping the landscape of charitable work in the years that followed.

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