Pre-British Indian Economy and Self-Sufficient Village Community

It's Impact on Indian National Movement

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ABSTRACT

Through this study we can go back to the pre-British times of Indian life and study how the self-sufficient village community has been transformed drastically, and evolved as that of today in about 200 years. Enthusiastically one can consider the deeper aspects of British rule over India than mere political domination, and search into the socio-cultural change that has taken place in the overall life of a people, the people of India, a country that was once called 'the golden bird.' It takes up four important sectors of socio-cultural and economic life of the Indians viz., agriculture, small-scale industry, education, and politics and administration, and tries to establish how the British conquest affected these areas as far as Indian life is concerned.

1. INTRODUCTION

The pre-British Indian society was a self-sufficient village community based on agriculture and handicrafts. Many kingdoms rose and collapsed but the self-sufficient villages existed. The production of the villages remained uninterrupted for centuries. There never existed any private property in land. Also it was not considered the property of the king but of the village community. The village community produced for its own needs except for a share that had to be given to the feudal lord.

The complete absence of any contact with the outside world of a village reduced it to a single small unit not even having a better means of transport than bullock carts. A marriage or a pilgrimage was the only occasion when villagers left their village. Due to this absence of contact, a calamitous flood or failure of crops threatened the village with the possibility of extinction. The belief of the villagers in caste system, their isolated existence, their fear of a calamitous flood, their superstitions imposed on them from childhood, took away their eagerness of investigating and experimenting for ages.

At this time around, 'Industrial Revolution' had already started in Europe.

The expansion of science and technologies in various countries of Europe led to the foundation of new industries, which substantially increased the production of goods. For this, the people of Europe felt the need for new sources of new materials. Vasco-de Gama's landing on the Indian mainland through waterways helped other European nations including the British approach India directly without any intermediaries. Soon India became a land of free looters.

When British first reached India for selling articles, and also in search of raw materials, they found India politically very weak, and they found a very congenial atmosphere to gradually establish their empire in this country.

After strengthening their base in India, the British established the East India Company for carrying on the trading activities in India. After remaining for 150 years as a trading company, in the next 100 years it could establish its influence over India, and in 1858, the Government of India was brought directly under the British Crown. Even prior to this, no sooner had they begun enslaving India politically, than they started bringing in various policies to

their own advantage. These policies were solely aimed at exploiting the Indian economy to the maximum. Their own progress in Science and Technology helped them in carrying out their plans successfully. As a result the British rule over India was disastrous to the Indian economy, especially rural economy. In this regard, Karl Marx rightly remarks: "England has to fulfil a double mission in India: one destructive and the other regenerating—the annihilation of the old Asiatic society, and the laying of the material foundations of Western society in Asia**. …** The British destroyed it (Hindu civilization) by breaking up the native communities, by uprooting the native industry**…"**

Most of the British policies were not likely to do justice to the Indian people. As a result each policy had met with opposition from the affected group in the form of small uprisings. In order to contain these oppositions, the British used both tactics and force occasionally. Introduction of Railways helped them in the frequent movement of armies to suppress such uprisings. They have also adopted the policy of 'divide and rule' particularly between Hindus and Muslims so that the Indian people remained divided, thus preventing a large-scale upheaval. In the present study, these policies and the reactions which attracted are examined in detail.

2. INDIAN AGRICULTURE UNDER BRITISH RULE AND ITS IMPACT

The Indian feudalism was different from that of Europe due to the fact that no class of feudal lords existed with proprietary rights over the land. The feudal lords that existed in the pre-British Indian society were appointed by the Monarch to collect land revenue from a specific number of villages. Only the Monarch or the State received a definite proportion of the produce. Also there did not exist any individual peasant

proprietorship. This means that there was no private ownership for agricultural land; the land was the property of the village as a whole. It was for the villagers to pay the revenue on the agricultural production, but should there be a failure of the crops due to some natural calamity they had the freedom not to pay the tax in that year. None of the rulers whether Hindu or Muslim made any attempt to transform the age-old practice of the village communities in the agricultural sector. In this context Radhakamal Mukerji remarks, "The soil in India belonged to the tribe or its subdivision—the village community, the clan or the brotherhood settled in the village—and never was the property of the king."

The British conquest of India led to a transformation in the existing land system. It created two forms of property in land by displacing the traditional right of the village community over the land. These were landlordism (also known as Zemindari system) and individual peasant proprietorship. Lord Cornwallis, the then Governor General introduced this system in 1793 by creating the first group of landlords. This system was known as 'Permanent Land Settlement.' These landlords were appointed from among the feudal lords who in pre-British time were appointed to collect the tax. There were three reasons that made Lord Cornwallis to introduce the landlord system in India. Firstly, he adopted the British feudal system in the land settlements, which had the system of private property in land. Secondly, it was easier to collect land revenue from few landlords than collecting it from numerous village panchayats. Thirdly, the new British *Raj* in India needed some support from within the country. Introducing new class of landlords, who were indebted to the British rule, helped the British to gain the support of these landlords.

As per the terms of this 'Settlement,' the lords had to pay a fixed amount to the government of East India Company

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irrespective of the year's production. If a landlord failed to pay the revenue, he had to lose his possession and proprietary rights over the land. When the British soon realised that it was disadvantageous for them to have fixed revenue from the landlords, they introduced a new revenue system, which was temporary. Accordingly, the revenue payments to be given to the British government could be changed. The Permanent *Zemindari* system existed in some places like Bengal; Bihar, and the Temporary *Zemindari* system existed in Bombay, Punjab etc.

Another settlement introduced by the land system was the 'Individual Peasant Proprietorship,' also known as the *Ryotwari* system. In this system the peasant was made the owner of the land he tilled. The system of revenue was the same as that of the *Zemindari* system.

Thus, the new system of land settlement and revenue payment, for the first time, made the land a commodity in the market that could be mortgaged, sold or purchased. The British authorities not only took away the proprietary rights of the village community over the land but also their judiciary rights. Since an individual peasant or a landlord was the owner of the land they had direct connection with British government. Therefore, the disputes over the land were not settled by the village *panchayats* but by the courts established by the centralized state. In pre-British India the produce from the village agriculture was used by the villagers. But after the introduction of the new land system, the production for village use was replaced by market-oriented production. This means that the peasant produced mainly for the market. This, however, led to an improvement in the means of transport and trading. The peasant now traded with a view to avail maximum cash since he had to pay the land revenue every year, which was fixed at an unfairly high rate. In this regard, Gadgil rightly comments:

It was this ease of communication that was bringing about another important change in Indian agriculture. This change might be called, for want of a better term, the commercialisation of agriculture. Broadly speaking, the change might be described as a change from cultivation for home consumption to cultivation for the market.

Thus, the new land settlement broke the bonds between the village peasants, who in pre-British India had a collective system for agricultural production.

3. THE DISASTROUS EFFECTS OF BRITISH RULE

In pre-British India, the Indian craftsmen were the suppliers of highest class of goods on a big State occasion. Also they produced military weapons like swords, spears, shields etc. made of iron and steel. Also the artistic industries had reached a high state.

The impact of the British rule on the town handicrafts was enormous. The causes for the decline of town handicrafts were many. The British conquest of India resulted in the disappearance of the states and their rulers. New form of administration was introduced by the East India Company. This had a direct effect on the town handicrafts since the states were the biggest customers of the handicrafts. This slowly curtailed the demand for their products. The stoppage of production for the kings i.e., for aristocratic families and military purposes also badly hit the Indian handicrafts.

Thus, the rule of East India Company proved very disastrous to the Indian Handicrafts. Other than destroying the native states and their rulers, the Company, which was under the pressure of the British Government, adopted various measures which in turn resulted in the decline of Indian handicrafts. Also, being a trading company, it wanted to produce things cheaply and sell them profitably in the

market. So, they levied heavy export duties on the Indian goods which further lowered the production. The company also prohibited the handicraftsmen and artisans to sell their goods to other foreign merchants except to the British. The Company had of course come to India not to buy manufactured goods produced in India but to secure a market to sell various goods manufactured in England. Thus, the result was the abandoning of the work by the handicraftsmen, the artisans and the owners and the workers of small-scale industries. Many people left their jobs, as they had no alternative to this oppression. In this regard, Bolts records, "About above seven hundred families of weavers, in the districts around Jungalbarry, at once abandoned their country and profession". Thus, it was the end of the Indian handicrafts, which had existed for centuries now and had spread the fame of India throughout the world.

But this decline and decay of Indian handicrafts had a historical significance too. It is true that the suffocating over-pressure on Indian handicraftsmen, ruined them. But we should recognize that this decline of handicrafts and agriculture transformed India into a single economy. It unified all Indian people and not a section. The handicraftsmen and agriculturists took to modern Indian industry, and became tenants and land labourers. They steadily increased the working class and became an integral part of these classes. They now achieved the states of being the members of the Indian nation.

4. MODERN EDUCATIONAL POLICIES AND SYSTEM

The pre-British Indian society, which had existed for centuries, was not without any scientific knowledge. It possessed the knowledge of astronomy, astrology, mathematics, and also science of medicine. The Indian people excelled in sciences like mathematics centuries before the modern people of the world awoke. But, thereafter the Indian society remained almost static and did not progress appreciably. As Trevelvan rightly says:

The time has arrived when the ancient debt of civilization which Europe owes to Asia is about to be repaid; and the sciences, cradled in the East and brought to maturity in West, are now by a final effort to over-spread the world.

The Hindu society in the pre-British was stratified on caste. The Brahmin caste had the right to perform the religious activities and to function as preachers. Also, they alone had the privilege to study and gain knowledge. The medium of teaching was Sanskrit. The education was the means to teach the pupil to accept the existing caste-system and to believe in Vedas.

In the Muslim society there was no monopoly of any section. Any Muslim could study and gain knowledge. All higher education was given in Arabic since the Koran was written in that language. In this context O'Malley's comments are relevant:

The systems' had much in common. They taught in a language foreign to the people at large, they drew their strength from their association with religion, and, being based on unchanging authority, they discouraged the spirit of free inquiry and resisted change. But there was one respect in which they differed profoundly. While the Hindu schools were designed for one favoured class of the community... Muslim schools... were open without let to all who confessed that there was but one God and Muhammad was his Prophet.[6] Two main agencies were responsible for spreading modern education in India— The Christian missionaries and the British Government. The Christian missionaries did an appreciable work. They opposed the caste system in the Hindu society since they believed in one God and social equality. The British Government also helped in this sphere a lot. It opened a network of schools and colleges in India. There is no denying the fact that the British

Government introduced the Western education system in India to fulfil its selfish aims.

But whatever might be the other aims of the British, the western education brought the Indians close to the other philosophers and revolutionaries who fought against social injustice, economic exploitation etc. Thus, the modern education promoted among the Indians, the ideas of nationalism and socialism.

The Charter Act of 1813 provided an allotment of one lac rupees for education every year. But little was done with respect to this till 1854. Thereafter, Sir Charles Wood sent his famous Despatch to India called as the Wood's Despatch. Thus, it was the Wood's Despatch of 1854, which laid the foundation of the structure of the modern educational system in India. According to this, various steps were taken for the spread of education. Firstly, a department of public instruction was established in every province. Secondly, a model high school was established in every district. Thirdly, universities were established in three Presidency Towns of Bombay, Madras, and Calcutta. Fourthly, a system of Grant-in-aid to private schools was started. Fifthly, a new post called the 'Indian Education Service' was introduced to provide teachers to the Government schools.

The Western culture imparted through the modern education system in India did not advocate unhealthy personal habits such as misuse of individual freedom. Rather than positively adopting and spreading the newly received freedom of life and thought, the newly educated Indians indulged in the black side of the Westernised life such as drinking alcohol, and other social misdoings. Thus, rather than forming a positive and progressive outlook, the modern educated youths distanced themselves from the ordinary social life. As a result the ordinary Indians misunderstood the modern English education system as something to be abhorred.

5.   POLITICAL AND ADMINISTRATIVE POLICIES INTRODUCED BY THE BRITISH

The British introduced various policies in India in order to gain political power. One of the major policies introduced by them was the 'Subsidiary Alliance.' Although many Governor Generals practiced this policy, it was Lord Wellesley who pursued it enthusiastically. Under this system, any head of a state who entered into a subsidiary alliance with the British, had to give certain money or some territory to maintain the British army. He was also not allowed to enter into any alliance with any other power. In return for this, the company undertook the responsibility to protect a prince from external dangers and internal disorders.

Another policy introduced by the British was the 'Doctrine of Lapse'. Just as Lord Wellesley greatly expanded the British territories by adopting the system of Subsidiary Alliance, Lord Dalhousie greatly expanded the boundaries of the British Empire by annexing various states on the basis of Doctrine of Lapse. In this system, if the ruler of dependant state dies without any heir i.e., without any son, his adopted son would not succeed him, and the state will pass on to the British Company. And the adopted son would inherit only the personal property of the deceased ruler.

In pre-British India, there was no political and administrative unification. It was divided into a large number of states that frequently fought with each other to extend their territories. It is true that attempts were made by monarchs like Ashoka, Samudragupta, Akbar to have political unification. But the village that was self-governing had no effect by these policies. It continued to be a self-sufficient community. In this regard, O'Malley remarks: "The villages had an organization designed to

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make them self-supporting and self-governing. Their autonomy was part of a loosely organized system of government, in which the sovereign power left communal and local institutions to function independently, each in its limited sphere. Each village co-ordinated the social activities of the inhabitants and was an independent unit."

The British conquest of India established a uniform reign of law in the country. These laws were applicable to every citizen of the state. The British established the system of lower courts and higher courts. The British have done away with the old caste system where Brahmins were considered superior to all other castes. Equal punishments were given to all those who broke the laws. All were considered equal before the law. Thus, all these policies, introduced by the British in India, enabled them to annex more and more smaller states to their territory. This in turn strengthened them both politically and economically, to eventually emerge as an invincible colonial power within India.

6.   THE REVOLT OF 1857

The British government in India was mainly concerned about maintaining its own interests. This brought a conflict between the British and the Indians. The outcome of these conflicts was the birth of many political movements. The owners of the small-scale industries had Britain as a hindrance to carry on its programme for industrial development. Since the high posts were given to the British officials only, the educated class also was not satisfied with the British rule. The agriculturists, whose life deteriorated progressively due to the introduction of the new land settlements, considered British as a great obstacle in their path. The treatment meted out by the British to the Indian masses of all classes, resulted initially in small uprisings from different and distant pockets that culminated in the revolt of 1857.

The first revolt against the British broke out in Bengal soon after the establishment of British rule over there. It was led by *Sanyasis*, *Fakirs*, and Peasants. Another revolt, organized by a Muslim sect called *Farazis* also took place against the oppression of *Zemindars* and the British. There were also many tribal uprisings against the British rule from the tribes like *Bhils* of Madhya Pradesh, *Gonds* and *Khonds* of Bengal; Bihar; and Orissa, and *Kolis* of Maharashtra. Even the Sepoys of the Company organized mutinies against the British, especially the Vellore Mutiny of 1806 and the Barrack pore Mutiny of 1824.

Now a question arises as to why these revolts did not stand as a threat to the British rule. Firstly, these revolts were local in nature. Secondly, these revolts were not properly organized. Thirdly, the rebels were not trained and well equipped. As a result, none of these revolts could achieve its end, if at all there was any.

The revolt of 1857 produced far-reaching results. Firstly, the rule of the company ended and India was brought directly under the control of the British Government. Secondly, Queen Victoria issued a Proclamation in 1858, which gave the Indian rulers the right to adopt sons. The Indian people were given full religious rights. Thirdly, the Indians were assured that they would be appointed to high post if they were qualified. Fourthly, the British government guaranteed that they would try to advance the material and moral progress of India.

But even after organizing this revolt in a well-planned manner, it failed to achieve the desired result due to various reasons. Firstly, the Indian soldiers were ill equipped. Secondly, the Hindu revolutionaries wanted to establish Maratha rule whereas Muslims wanted to revive their Mughal Kingdom. Thirdly, there was no political unity among the Indian leaders, and they lacked the qualities of generalship and military training.

Fourthly, the uprising started much before the fixed date i.e., 31st May 1857. In this regard, what Joan Beauchamp says is significant: "The lack of unity in the forces against the British was a factor of which they took full advantage. The native chiefs soon realized that if they joined too closely with the peasants and artisans, the control of the movement would gradually slip out of their hands."

7. CONCLUSION

The aftermath of colonial rule in any part of the world is agonisingly devastative socially, politically, economically, and even psychologically. In the postcolonial scenario much has been discussed about the European colonialisation in the various lands of the world.

Seeing from the traditional point of view the colonialisation by the British in India and their rule over her for about 150 years have done her much harm and much less good. A people, traditionally passive, religious, self-sufficient, spiritual, and philosophical, have been dominated by another who are culturally and politically distant, having totally materialistic outlook. The impact of this domination has badly affected the socio-ethico cultural life of the Indian people. This is evident from the fact that we have not yet been able to do away with the mix up in various counters of social and cultural life. Looking at the British colonial rule from the point of exploitation both economically and culturally, using physical force, nothing less than the term 'barbarism' can explain these extravaganzas on the part of the British. A culture has been tampered with; history has been mis-channelled, and an emotional people have been disoriented.

The National movement took its own time, and won freedom from the British but not without showing its bloody tooth and claw. It was the scheme of the British and the naiveté of our leaders that India was torn into Hindustan and Pakistan, and the rest is history.

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