

Dr. Belmerabet Fatiha

Lecture Five: British Imperialism in India

1.1. The East India Company: Initially Driven by Trade

The initial British presence in India revolved around trade rather than conquest. In 1600, a group of English merchants obtained a royal charter to engage in trade in the East Indies. This marked the establishment of The East India Company, which eventually expanded its operations into the vast Indian subcontinent. India, with its abundant raw materials, was a crucial supplier for Britain's booming Industrial Revolution. Moreover, its population of 300 million presented a significant potential market for British-manufactured goods. The annual shipment of about twenty to thirty ships from India to Britain was valued at around £2 million.

The importance of India to Britain led to the phrase "Jewel in the Crown" as a metaphor for its immense value. Until the early 19th century, the East India Company largely governed India with minimal interference from the British government. The company even maintained its own military force, comprised of Indian soldiers known as sepoys, and led by British officers. The governor of Bombay, Mountstuart Elphinstone, acknowledged the delicate and precarious nature of this sepoy army, cautioning that mismanagement could easily turn it against British interests.

1.2. The Battle of Plassey (1757)

The British Empire in India was characterized by biased perceptions influenced by social Darwinism and evangelicalism, which provided justification for imperial rule. Racism played a significant role in the British Empire's relationship with India. During the late 18th century, it became commonplace among the British, regardless of social class, to hold a disdainful view of Indians. This prevailing attitude fueled discontent among the Indian population.

Many Indians felt that the British not only sought to control their land but also aimed to convert them to Christianity. They also resented the constant racism they faced from the British. In response to these circumstances, Indians decided to revolt against the East India Company (EIC) and its policies in India. This uprising became known as the "Sepoy Mutiny of 1857."

Moreover, the British Empire in India was characterized by biased perceptions rooted in social Darwinism and evangelicalism, which contributed to the presence of racism and discontent among the Indian people. The resulting Sepoy Mutiny of 1857 was a response to these grievances.

1.3. Racism and Rebellion (The Sepoy Mutiny 1857)

Racism and rebellion were intertwined in the context of British imperialism in India, with biased notions influenced by social Darwinism and evangelicalism serving as justifications for imperial rule. Racism formed a fundamental characteristic of the British Empire's presence in India, with widespread contempt towards Indians becoming commonplace among the British by the late 18th century, regardless of social class (Hiro, 277). Various grievances among the Indian population contributed to pockets of discontent. Many Indians believed that the British not only aimed to control their land but also sought to convert them to Christianity. They also resented the consistent racism exhibited by the British (The Age of Imperialism, 359).

As a reaction to these realities, the Indian people decided to revolt against the East India Company (EIC) and its policies in India, which came to be known as the "Sepoy Mutiny of 1857." The causes of the rebellion were numerous and encompassed the imposition of Western technologies, such as the railroad and telegraph, on a traditional society, the enforcement of English as the language for courts and government schools, the opening of the country to missionaries that created fear of forced conversions, the EIC's annexation of subsidiary states upon the death of a prince without a direct heir, increasing arrogance and detachment on the part of the rulers, and policies that prioritized the Company's profits over the welfare of the people (Blackwell, 36). The introduction of the Enfield rifle to the sepoys, which required

handling cartridges greased with beef and pork fat, served as the spark for outrage among both Muslims and Hindus who perceived it as an attempt to Christianize them.

Regaining control of the country took over a year for the East India Company, with assistance from the British government's troops. Weak leadership and significant divisions between Hindus and Muslims prevented the Indians from uniting against the British. Many Hindus did not desire the restoration of the Muslim Mughal Empire and actually preferred British rule. The majority of the princes and maharajahs who had formed alliances with the East India Company did not participate in the rebellion. Additionally, the Sikhs, a religious group historically hostile towards the Mughals, remained loyal to the British and became a crucial pillar of Britain's army in India, characterized by their bearded and turbaned appearance (The Age of Imperialism, 360). The rebellion marked a significant turning point, shattering trust between the British and the Indian people, establishing a permanent divide between the two sides (Misra, 7)

1.4. The Official Declaration of the British Indian Empire

After the rebellion, the British Crown assumed direct responsibility for governing India, leading to the disbandment of the East India Company (Maddison, 2005). In 1877, Queen Victoria was officially declared Empress of India. The leaders who governed India during this period, known as Governor-Generals or Viceroys, came and went, but the overarching goal remained clear: imperial rule for the benefit of Britain, rather than prioritizing the welfare of the Indian people (Blackwell, 36).

As a means of rewarding the loyal princes, the British pledged to uphold all treaties previously made between the East India Company and the princely states. They also assured the independence of the remaining Indian states. However, unofficially, Britain gradually increased its control over these states, gaining more influence and power. The racist attitudes of the British were fueled by the Sepoy Mutiny. Lord Kitchener, the British commander in chief of the army in India, encapsulated this mindset in a quote, stating, "It is this consciousness of the inherent superiority of the European which has won for us India. However well-educated and clever a native may

be, and however brave he may prove himself, I believe that no rank we can bestow on him would cause him to be considered an equal of the British officer" (quoted in Sammis, 83).

To conclude, the British Crown assumed direct responsibility for India, leading to the dissolution of the East India Company. Queen Victoria's proclamation as Empress of India in 1877 marked an official declaration. The governing officials, known as Governor-Generals or Viceroys, upheld imperial rule for the benefit of Britain. While the British promised to honor treaties and respect the independence of Indian states, in practice, they gradually exerted greater control. The Sepoy Mutiny further entrenched racist attitudes among the British, as exemplified by Lord Kitchener's perspective on the inherent superiority of Europeans.

1.5. British Imperialism and Colonial Rule in India: Methods and Impacts

Divide and Conquer: British Strategies in India and Their Consequences

The British implemented a "divide and rule" policy in India, deliberately stoking animosity between Hindus and Muslims, which led to widespread violence, displacement, and the destruction of key economic assets (Lyer, 2010; Tharoor, 2017). Recognizing India's diverse sociocultural landscape, the British aimed to exploit this diversity by fostering divisions between different religious and social groups, such as Hindus against Muslims and the masses against the princely rulers (Baber, 1996, p. 127). The unity displayed by Hindu and Muslim soldiers during the 1857 mutiny alarmed the British rulers, prompting them to implement policies and initiatives to sow discord between Hindus and Muslims. This included favoring Hindus while marginalizing Muslims, leading to increased hostilities (Rahman, Ali, and Khan, 4).

Colonial Education: The British disregarded the existing faith-based education system in India, which involved madrasas, maktabas, pathshalas, and tols where Muslim and Hindu children were taught a range of subjects in Arabic, Persian, Sanskrit, and theology (Chopra, Puri, & Das, 2003; Nurullah & Naik, 1943). Instead, they introduced a British educational system. Thomas Babington Macaulay, a British figure, articulated the British intentions behind introducing English education, stating

that they aimed to create a class of Indians who would act as intermediaries between the British rulers and the Indian masses, embracing English language, values, and knowledge (Macaulay, 1965, p. 116). The British endeavored to transform various aspects of Indian culture, including religious practices and customs, using the pretext of the "white man's burden."

Application of British Legal Systems: Initially, English law was applied only to Europeans residing in India, while Islamic law was applied to Muslims and Hindu law to Hindus in matters of marriage, inheritance, and personal affairs (Otter, 2012). This bifurcation of the law, though not explicitly intended as a "divide and rule" strategy, had lasting consequences that ultimately contributed to the partition of the subcontinent along religious lines. Indigenous Indian customs and laws were initially idealized, but British philosopher James Mill dismissed them as disorderly and unintelligible compilations (Judd, 2004, p. 38).

Undermining India's Local Industry: Indian authors have argued that British rule resulted in the deindustrialization of India. R.C. Dutt highlighted how India was a significant manufacturing and agricultural nation in the 18th century, with Indian textiles dominating Asian and European markets. However, the East India Company and the British Parliament pursued policies to undermine Indian manufacturers and promote British industries. Their aim was to make India subservient to the industries of Great Britain, restricting Indian production to raw materials for British factories (Dutt, xxv).

In summary, British strategies in India, including divide and rule policies, the imposition of colonial education, the application of British legal systems, and the undermining of India's local industries, had far-reaching consequences. These strategies exacerbated religious and social divisions, disrupted traditional educational systems, eroded indigenous legal practices, and stifled India's manufacturing sector, ultimately shaping the trajectory of British colonial rule in India.

1.6. The Birth of Indian Nationalism: The Role of the Indian National Congress

unexpectedly, the origins of the Indian National Congress (INC) and the nascent national movement can be traced back to a British figure, Allan Octavian Hume. In his address to the graduating class of Calcutta University, Hume inspired the formation of the INC. On December 28, 1885, the INC held its inaugural meeting, comprising lawyers and intellectuals with the primary aim of empowering Indians and giving them a greater say in shaping their own future. Tensions with the British government emerged soon after the establishment of the Congress party (Welsh, 2011). The organization demanded broader representation in the government, advocating for the people to have their rightful and legitimate share in governance (quoted in Hiro, 259). The INC initially consisted predominantly of upper-class Hindus and Parsis, many of whom were lawyers, with only two Muslims in attendance. Under the leadership of lawyers like Motilal Nehru, Jawaharlal Nehru, and M. K. Gandhi, India eventually achieved independence (Blackwell, 37).

The formation of the INC and the broader nationalist movement were made possible by the English language, which became a lingua franca in India following the Governor-General's decision in 1835 to make it the official language of instruction. This decision had far-reaching consequences, as it enabled those educated in English law to envision possibilities of constitutional democracy. With no single Indian language dominating as a majority, English provided a common medium of communication among the educated from various regions of India. The significance of this development cannot be overstated. It also led to the establishment of universities in Bombay, Madras, and Calcutta, and fostered a vibrant albeit often censored press, as well as the emergence of Indian literature in English. These aspects continue to thrive today and have played a vital role in shaping Indian society.

One of the most significant outcomes of these developments was the growth of nationalism, which sought to counteract the British policy of divide and rule that exploited Hindu-Muslim tensions. While the creation of Pakistan revealed the

limitations of this dream, contemporary India stands as a successful democracy. The nationalist movement helped forge a new Indian identity that transcended cultural, linguistic, religious, and caste differences, paving the way for a unified nation.