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Module: ASCC

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**Lecture Five: British Imperialism in India**

**The East India Company: Trade was the first intention!**

The first British in India were traders, not conquerors. In 1600, a group of English merchants secured a royal charter for purposes of trading in the East Indies. Their company, known as **The** **East India Company**, turned its attention to the vast expanse of India. (Blackwell, 34. The Age of Imperialism, 357). The Industrial Revolution had turned Britain into the world’s workshop, and India was a major supplier of raw materials for that workshop. Its 300 million people were also a large potential market for British-made goods. About “twenty to thirty ships were sent yearly and were worth up to £2 million” ( Mastoi, Lohar, and Ali Shah, 25). It is due to this reason that the British considered India as the brightest “**Jewel in the Crown**”. Until the beginning of the 19th century, the company ruled India with little interference from the British government. The company even had its own army, led by British officers and staffed by **sepoys**, or Indian soldiers. The governor of Bombay, Mountstuart Elphinstone, referred to the sepoy army as “a delicate and dangerous machine, which a little mismanagement may easily turn against us.” (Keene, 96).

**The Battle of Plassey (1757)**

The British took advantage of the instability and the resulting regional tensions that occurred after the fall of the Mughal Empire (Blackwell, 35). Through machinations and intrigues, a force of eight hundred Europeans and 2,200 Indian troops defeated an army of 50,000 belonging to the ruler of Bengal (Blackwell, 35). This event is known as the “**Battle of Plassey**” that took place in 23 June 1757 under the leadership of Robert Clive, the EIC’s governor (the battle was held by the army of EIC). Many historians argue that the Indian defeat was due to a conspiracy of Mir Jafar with Clive against Siraj-ud-Daula, the nawab of Bengal. The largest contingent of the nawabi army remained inactive under Mir Jafar’s command. Jafar became the new nawab and served as “the puppet in the hands of the English” (Bandyopadhyay, 44). The nawab of Bengal was defeated along with his French allies that were in constant rivalry with the British. Thus, two powerful opponents were swiped away, marking the first steps towards Empire.

The power of the Company did not go unnoticed by British government. The Regulating Act of 1793 was the first one in a series of acts reining in the Company through parliamentary supervision. Arthur Wellesley, as governor-in-general (1797-1805), exercised his intention to make the Company the paramount power in India. He was able to suppress the little remaining French influence and also removed powerful Indian forces in both the north and the south. The British (at this period meaning the Company) were very powerful and they developed a bureucratuc infrastructure, “employing cooperating Indians, who came to constitute a **new, urban class**” (Blackwell, 35). The title of **Governor-General** had been bestowed upon the governor of the Bengal presidency (Calcutta), who had been granted power and rank over the governors of the Bombay and Madras presidencies. This was an administrative step toward **unity** which certainly aided the **arrangement** for empire. With the transition of the Company to the role of **ruler**, the British attitude toward Indians degenerated (Blackwell, 35).

**Racism and Rebellion (The Sepoy Mutiny 1857)**

Biased concepts regarding non-Western cultures and non-white peoples, arising from so-called **social** **Darwinism** and evangelicalism, provided rationale for imperial rule. **Racism** is a core characteristic of the British Empire in India. “By the late 18th century it had become commonplace among the British, irrespective of class, to despise Indians.” (Hiro, 277). There were many pockets of discontent among Indian people. Many believed that in addition to **controlling their land**, the British were trying to **convert them to Christianity**. The Indian people also resented the constant racism that the British expressed toward them (the age of imperialism, 359). As a reaction to these realities, Indian people decided to revolt against the EIC and its policy in India. This rebellion was termed the “**Sepoy Mutiny of 1857**”.

The causes were numerous, and included **forcing** the use of **Western technologies**—the railroad and telegraph—upon a highly **traditional** society, **imposition of English** as the language for courts and government schools, opening the country to **missionaries** (with the resulting fear of forced conversions), Company **takeover** of subsidiary states when a prince died without direct heir, increasing haughtiness and distance on the part of the rulers, and policies beneficial to the Company's profits, but even inimical to the people, and so on. The spark was the introduction of the **Enfield rifle** to the sepoy ranks, which necessitated handling of cartridges packed in beef and pork fat that sepoys had to bite. Both Muslims and Hindus were outraged and considered the act as an attempt to Christianize them (Blackwell, 36). The rebellion and the gruesome reaction to it were atrocious enough, but, as Maria Misra has observed, “The after-shock of the Rebellion was if anything even more influential than the event itself” (Misra, 7).

The East India Company took more than a year to regain control of the country. The British government sent troops to help them. The Indians could not unite against the British due to **weak leadership** and serious **splits between Hindus and Muslims**. Hindus did not want the Muslim Mughal Empire restored. Indeed, many Hindus preferred British rule to Muslim rule. Most of the princes and maharajahs who had made alliances with the East India Company did not take part in the rebellion. The Sikhs, a religious group that had been hostile to the Mughals, also remained loyal to the British. Indeed, from then on, the bearded and turbaned Sikhs became the mainstay of Britain’s army in India (the Age of Imperialism, 360). A curtain had fallen, and the two sides would never trust each other again.

**The Official Declaration of the British Indian Empire**

The Crown took over direct responsibility and the East India Company was disbanded (Maddison, 2005). In 1877, Queen Victoria was proclaimed Empress of India. Governor-Generals, popularly referred to as Viceroys (after 1858), came and went, but the direction remained clear: “Imperial rule for the profit of Britain, not for the welfare of the people of India” (Blackwell, 36). To reward the many princes who had remained loyal to Britain, the British promised to respect all treaties the East India Company had made with them. They also promised that the Indian states that were still free would remain independent. Unofficially, however, Britain won greater and greater control of those states. The Sepoy Mutiny fueled the **racist** attitudes of the British. The British attitude is illustrated in a quote by Lord Kitchener, British commander in chief of the army in India who said that “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” (qtd. in. Sammis, 83).

**The methods and Impact of British Imperialism and colonialism in India**

**Divide and Rule**: The British used the strategy of “divide and rule” to provoke hostility between Hindus and Muslims. The divide and rule policy used religion to drive a wedge between Indians which eventually resulted in the death and displacement of millions of people, as well as the destruction of key economic assets (Lyer, 2010; Tharoor, 2017). The British realized that India was a land of **sociocultural diversity**, and to exploit and control the lands, it was imperative to incite Hindus against Muslims and the masses against the princes (Baber, 1996, p. 127). In the 1857 mutiny, Hindu and Muslim soldiers were unified around loyalty to the Mughal prince, which **worried** the British rulers who devised policies and programs to fracture relationships between Muslims and Hindus. For example, the British ousted Muslims from power and they naturally were hostile to the British who favored Hindus (Rahman, Ali, and Khan, 4).

**Spreading colonial education**: Prior to the British arrival, Muslim children were schooled in madrasas and maktabs, and Hindu children were taught in pathshalas and tols. These institutions taught children Arabic, Persian, Sanskrit, theology, grammar, logic, law, mathematics, metaphysics, medicine, and astrology (Chopra, Puri, & Das, 2003; Nurullah & Naik, 1943). The British government, however, ignored this faith-based education system and replaced it with a British system. Thomas Babington Macaulay, a British, made a comment that reflects the British intentions for introducing English education for Indians:

We must at present do our best to form a class who may be **interpreters** between us and the millions whom we govern; a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect. To that class, we may leave it to **refine** the vernacular dialects of the country, to **enrich** those dialects with terms of **science** borrowed from the **Western** nomenclature, and to render them by degrees’ fit **vehicles for conveying knowledge** to the great mass of the population. (Macaulay, 1965, p. 116)

The British did not save any effort to change every bit of Indian **culture**. They interfered in every single cultural tradition, including religious matters, and attempted to change the beliefs that had ruled the lives of both Muslims and Hindus. This includes specific cultural practices of Indian women as well. They used the argument of the **white man’s burden** in these missions of changing Indian culture.

**The application of British law systems:** the codified English law administered by the courts was initially applied only to Europeans residing in the sub-continent. However, by 1773 it was proposed that in matters of marriage, inheritance, and other individual affairs, Islamic laws should be applied to Muslims, and Hindu laws to Hindus (Otter, 2012). While it is not clear whether this bifurcation of the law was proposed to introduce the policy of divide and rule, it had long lasting impacts that ultimately led to the division of the sub-continent based on religion. This idealization of Indigenous Indian customs and laws was, however, short lived. For instance, the British philosopher James Mill considered Indigenous Indian laws to be “a **disorderly** compilation of loose, vague, **stupid**, or unintelligible quotations and maxims selected **arbitrarily** from book of law, book of devotion, and books of poetry; attended with a commentary which only adds to the **absurdity** and **darkness**; a farrago by which nothing is defined, nothing established” (Judd, 2004, p. 38).

**Weakening India’s local Industry**: Several Indian authors have argued that British rule led to a de-industrialization of India. R.C. Dutt argued:

India in the eighteenth century was a great manufacturing as well as a great agricultural country, and the products of the Indian loom supplied the markets of Asia and Europe. It is, unfortunately, true that the East India Company and the British Parliament, following the selfish commercial policy of a hundred years ago, discouraged Indian manufacturers in the early years of British rule in order to encourage the rising manufactures of England. Their fixed policy, pursued during the last decades of the eighteenth century and the first decades of the nineteenth, was to make India subservient to the industries of Great Britain, and to make the Indian people grow raw produce only, in order to supply material for the looms and manufactories of Great Britain”. (Dutt, xxv)

**National beginnings**

Surprisingly, the inception of the **Indian National Congress** (INC) and the first stirrings of a **national** **movement** owed its origins to a Briton. Allan Ovtavian Hume in an address to the graduating class of Calcutta University. The INC, composed of **lawyers** and other **intellectuals** met for the first time on December 28, 1885. Their primary objective was to give Indians a greater **voice** in their own destinies. Confrontation with the British arose soon after the establishment of the congress party (Welsh, 2011). This organization demanded that “the Government should be widened and that the people should have their proper and legitimate share in it”(qtd. in. Hiro, 259). It involved about seventy-two delegates, from various regions, and consisted mostly of upper class Hindus and Parsis (many of them lawyers) with **only two Muslims** in attendance. It was through this organization, under the leadership of lawyers such as **Motilal Nehru** and his son **Jawaharlal** **Nehru** (India's first prime minister), and **M. K. Gandhi**, that India achieved independence (Blackwell, 37).

Such a meeting, let alone the organization itself (or, for that matter, the nationalist/independence movement), would not have been possible had it not been for **the English language** as a lingua franca, which stemmed from the 1835 decision by the Governor-General to **make English the official language of instruction**. That decision opened a can of worms: men educated in **English law** saw the possibilities of constitutional democracy. No one Indian language could claim the majority of speakers, and English provided the **bridge** that made communication possible between the educated from different parts of India. The importance of this development cannot be overemphasized. Related developments included the establishment of universities (oddly, in 1857) in Bombay, Madras, and Calcutta; a vibrant (if often censored) press, and Indian **literature in English**. These all are evident and thriving yet today, and strongly so. The most important development might well have been that of nationalism, an attempt to override the British policy of divide-and-rule (which played on Hindu-Muslim antipathy). Of course, the creation of Pakistan showed that the dream was not completely successful—yet India today is a successful democracy. And the nationalist movement did bring the diverse cultures and languages, the religious sects and castes, into a new identity: Indian.

**Terms explained**

**The Raj**: It was Imperial Britain’s takeover of the rights and responsibilities of the former British East India Company, following the latter’s dissolution due to mismanagement.

**Nawab**: a deputy ruler or viceroy in India. In previous times it was bestowed by the reigning Mughal emperor to semi-autonomous Muslim rulers of subdivisions or princely states in the Indian subcontinent.

**Governor-general**: the representative of the monarch of the UK in India. After 1858 the governor-general was given the title of the “Viceroy”.

**Sepoy**: An Indian soldier serving under British or other Europian orders.