

British Rule in India deeply changed its politics, Economy, and Society

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Abstract: The paper discusses the great social and economic changes that happened in the Indian society under the British colonialists. It examines the impact of colonial policies on social structures, such as the entrenchment of caste dynamics, the introduction of Western education, and the emergence of social reform movements. The paper considers different aspects of such exploitation, such as the systematic destruction of India's indigenous industries by the British, the plunder of its wealth, and the use of economic policy to serve the interests of the empire. Writer refers to the deindustrialization of traditional crafts, unfair tax schemes, and the planned destruction of the Indian agriculture. The study uses historical facts and analytical theories such as the Drain of wealth to break the myth of colonial kindness. The study underlines the serious economic damage inflicted on India. It also looks at so-called infrastructural developments such as the railroads, presenting them as tools of extraction rather than empowerment. Politically it concerns the establishment of a centralized administration, legal changes and the rise of Indian nationalism. It also discusses the cultural and theological effects such as religious reform movements and cultural syncretism. The detailed study attempts to provide a nuanced comprehension of the complex legacy of British colonialism in India, highlighting both the negative and positive impacts on Indian society

Keywords: Women's, Education Policy, British rule, Christian missionaries

1. Introduction:

Mughal dominance peaked in the second half of the eighteenth century, when colonial rule began in India. The Treaty of Allahabad, which established colonial rule in India, was signed in October 1765 by Robert Clive, the first governor of Bengal [1, 2]. The Diwani rights (rights pertaining to tax collection) and Nizamat rights (rights pertaining to military administration) were thus used to establish a new form of dual government. Under the Regulating Act of 1773, the Governor of Bengal was given the title of Governor-General of Bengal. His term of office was fixed at five years.

The Governors of Madras and Bombay were placed under his authority. Thus, Warren Hastings became the first Governor-General of Bengal. During his tenure, the first Supreme Court in India was established at Calcutta. The establishment of the Supreme Court was an important development in the judicial administration of British India [3]. The establishment of British rule had both positive and negative impacts on Indian society and its economic conditions. Initially, the British came to India through the East India Company with the primary objective of conducting trade. However, after observing the political situation in India, the Company gradually expanded its political influence and established control over large parts of the country. As a result, many believed that India would develop into a significant market and raw material supplier for British goods in a free trade environment. British rule primarily aimed to exploit India's economy through trade, industry, and financial activities. As a result, the Indian economy became subordinated to the British economy [4, 5].

India emerged as a significant raw material supplier, a market for British exports, and a possible location for British capital investment. Through the Charter Act of 1813, the British Parliament passed a law to end the

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East India Company's trade monopoly and extend its license to rule for 20 years. Under this Act, private companies from Britain were also given permission to trade with India. Because the Company's trade monopoly ended, British-made goods (especially cotton clothes) flooded into the Indian market in large quantities. As a result, the decline of local weavers and artisans accelerated [3]. Under this Act, Christian missionaries from Britain received legal permission to set up their institutions in India and also "For the first time in India, the British government made a legal provision to spend ₹1 lakh annually on the education of Indians and the revival of literature. (Although this amount could not be spent for many years, it laid the foundation of modern education policy" [6, 7].

The British started treating land like a simple product to be bought and sold. They brought in the Permanent Settlement system just to collect more revenue, which trapped farmers into paying huge rents and left them completely broke.

Many peasants lost their land due to British rule. As the British Empire grew, landless workers started to fight for tenancy rights and against exploitation [8]. In its early years, the British Raj did not implement any programs for the welfare of the populace. The British didn't make policy changes in fields like agriculture, trade, education, and justice to actually modernize India—their main goal was just to run their colonial system without any trouble.

All the administrative, legal, and social reforms they introduced during the 18th and 19th centuries were meant to strengthen and protect British rule, not to help Indians. However, the motivations behind these actions were significantly different. It was believed that India should develop similarly to their home country, which would eventually result in the establishment of British rule [9, 10, 11].

Anti- leaders Lord Cornwallis (1786–93), Wellesley (1798–1805), Dalhousie (1848–56), and Curzon (1898–1905) preferred Indians for low-level colonial government positions. Under the ancient Hindu legal system, the penal code was structured around the varna (caste) hierarchy; while a Brahmin was exempt from capital punishment even for heinous crimes like murder—facing only exile or property confiscation—a Shudra faced mandatory mutilation or execution for inter-caste relations or offenses against higher castes.

Between the 1820s and 1850s, British authorities introduced the "Rule of Law" and legal reforms under the pretext of eliminating these traditional caste inequalities, although their underlying motive was primarily to consolidate colonial administrative control rather than moral benevolence [12].

However, Brahmins and Sudras received the same punishment for the same crime under British rule. In the East India Company bureaucracy, there was a noticeable rise in Benthamite radicalism at the same time. After penning a thorough history of India that showed a deep disdain for Indian institutions, James Mill rose to prominence as a business executive in 1819. British administrative unification, Western education, and legal equality led to the rise of a new intellectual and professional middle class consisting of lawyers, teachers, and civil servants.

In his book *The History of British India*, James Mill analyzed this development through the framework of Benthamite Uniformity. [12, 13, 14]. In Indian society, a new middle class emerged as a result of new economic and administrative structures. They were inspired to investigate and evaluate the problems in their society as a result of this exposure. This aristocratic class initiated campaigns against polytheism, animism, idolatry, purdah, caste boundaries, child marriage, sati, and other customs, leading to significant reformation. These evils are components of pre-modern or primitive identity [15, 16]. Women's emancipation dominated the social reform agenda.

They believed that women's status was a sign of a civilization's progress [17]. This inspiration inspired reformers such as Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Dayanand Saraswati, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, Mahadev Govind Ranade, Jyotiba Phule, Keshav Chandra Sen, and others to improve women's status [15,18].

2. Discussion

2.1 Transformation of Agrarian Systems and Economic Extraction: Prior to British rule, India's land and production systems were rooted in a traditional, feudal, and self-sustaining rural economy. Land was not generally regarded as private, alienable property to be bought and sold; rather, it was tied to customary rights and collective village obligations. British officials—particularly the Utilitarians and Ricardian economists—believed that a modern economy could not develop in India without the introduction of Western-style capitalist private property rights.

Consequently, they dismantled the pre-existing systems of production and tenancy [19]. Colonial revenue systems (such as Ryotwari and Mahalwari) forced farmers to pay rent in cash, compelling them to shift from food grains to cash crops like cotton, indigo, and jute, which severely undermined traditional food security. Furthermore, these land revenue mechanisms discouraged capital investment in productive agricultural technologies, as the economic surplus was drained by colonial taxes and landlord profits.

Confirming this breakdown, the 1867 Campbell Commission Report officially acknowledged that the Permanent Settlement and oppressive revenue policies had dismantled the rural safety net, leaving the peasantry with neither savings nor grain reserves [20]. Before the 1793 Permanent Settlement, Bengal's Zamindars were merely Mughal-era tax collectors, not landowners. Lord Cornwallis transformed them overnight into absolute proprietary landlords, reducing traditional peasants to vulnerable tenants.

This settlement was a deliberate political strategy: by granting these landlords immense economic power, the British created a loyal, influential ally to safeguard their rule—a shield that largely held firm even during the 1857 Revolt [21]. European capitalists who reinvested profits into factories, technology, and productivity, the British structured land revenue to drain agricultural surplus straight into colonial coffers and back to Britain [22, 23].

2.2 Racial Hegemony, Bureaucratic Centralization, and Legal Restructuring: British rule in India was underpinned by institutionalized racial supremacy, which combined deep-seated social alienation with the pseudo-scientific racism of the late 19th century. Colonial administrators maintained strict social apartheid—treating Indians as racially and morally inferior, barring them from equal social status, and segregating public spaces through European-only clubs and railway compartments.

To cement imperial control, this racial bias was codified into administrative policy, systematically restricting educated Indians from senior civil service ranks and establishing an official hierarchy that preserved white dominance over the native population [24, 25, 26]. In their interactions with Indians, regardless of their caste, religion, province, or class, many Englishmen adopted a tone of racial superiority while wearing the badge of inferiority. They were not allowed to participate in the crucial military and civil administration. To demoralize Indians, the legal system developed a common policy of racial arrogance.

One Englishman's evidence, the court reportedly gave greater weight to one Englishman's evidence than to that of numerous Indians [2, 27]. Such a system had given dishonest Englishmen a terrible tool of power. Indians were frequently required to ride in separate train cabins from European passengers and were prohibited from

entering European clubs. Nonetheless, many social customs, including the strict caste system, female infanticide, child marriage, sati, and polygamy, increased in popularity during the nineteenth century.

These actions were against human principles and dignity. Women were viewed as the most disadvantaged group in society and faced discrimination at every stage of life. There were no opportunities for them to modify their status through development. Only a small number of men from higher castes had access to education. The Vedas, written in Sanskrit, were accessible to Brahmins. After birth or death, the priestly elite prescribed expensive rites, sacrifices, and customs [28,29, 12]. New concepts like liberty, equality, freedom, and human rights were brought to India by the British and were inspired by several European movements, including the Renaissance and Reformation.

These concepts were embraced by some segments of our society, which sparked several reform movements across the nation [30, 31]. East India Company's old structure was supposed to offer its employees relatively low salaries and allow them to supplement their revenue through private transactions. Before the conquest of Bengal, this system had functioned rather well, but for two reasons, it was an ineffective way to compensate the officials of a vast territorial empire. First, a disproportionate amount of the profit was going to private individuals rather than the company's officers; second, an excessively rapacious short-term policy was harming the economy's ability to produce goods and was likely to incite a local uprising, both of which were detrimental to the company's long-term interests [23, 32]. Clive used a "dual" system in Bengal—company power and a puppet Nawab to address the crisis.

After the Nawab's overthrow, Warren Hastings, the Governor of Bengal (1772–85), took direct control, while Indian officials continued to serve. Ultimately, Cornwallis (1786–93) established a professional corps of Company workers in 1786, offering them pensions, regular promotions, no private trading or production interests in India, and excellent pay. Indians were not allowed to hold any of the high administrative positions, which were all reserved for the British. Because of India's interactions with the West, educated Indians believed that socio-religious change was essential to the nation's overall growth. [33, 34, 10].

2.3 Educational Policy, Social Reform, and the 1857 Rupture: Raja Rammohan Roy and other educated Indians worked with a systematic approach to eradicate social problems. Under Governor General Lord William Bentinck (1828–35), with assistance from Rammohan Roy, India saw the start of a period of social reforms. The act of burning a widow beside her deceased husband, known as sati, was outlawed or made illegal in 1829. Infanticide of females was outlawed. With Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar's assistance, Lord Dalhousie (1848–56) passed the Widow Remarriage Act in 1856. Vidyasagar also opposed polyandry and child marriage. To please God, certain tribes had the cruel practice of sacrificing small children.

Governor General Lord Harding (1910–16) forbade this practice (18). It is crucial to note that the reform movement began in Bengal and initially had an impact there before spreading throughout India. Introducing a modified form of English schooling was one of the most significant things the British did to westernize India. A classic example of the Western rationalist approach to Indian civilization is Macaulay's Minute on Education (2nd February, 1835), which had a significant influence on British educational policy [24].

Macaulay explicitly articulated the social engineering behind the policy: "It is impossible for us, with our limited means, to educate the body of the people. 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."

A new elite class in India emerged as a result of the Macaulay Minute, and they acted in accordance with their expectations. In terms of the English language and English schools, this new elite embraced a Western lifestyle. In segregated suburbs and housing, new towns and urban facilities were constructed for them. Lawyers, physicians, educators, journalists, and businesspeople were among the emerging professional groups whose practices they imitated.

This group experienced a rise in social mobility and a loosening of long-standing caste barriers. It wasn't until 1857 that the East India Company was able to eradicate traditional Indian civilization and westernize the nation. However, both the Hindu and Muslim communities actively participated in the 1857 uprising as a result of the British government's aggressive policies and attempts to expand British power by annexing the native nations.

The British approach toward Indian institutions and society became much more restrictive once this intense uprising came to a conclusion. In Hindi It wasn't until 1857 that the East India Company was able to eradicate traditional Indian civilization and westernize the nation. However, both the Muslim and Hindu communities actively took part in the 1857 uprising as a result of the assertive British policies and the aim to expand British power by annexing the native nations (15,41) With the end of this violent uprising, British policies toward Indian institutions and society became much more conservative.

2.4 Indian Women's Rights Movement Origins:: Rural women drive the agrarian economy yet face systemic subordination without land rights, enduring compounded caste-class oppression while social mobility paradoxically trades female autonomy for family prestige and dominance, (37]. The 19th- and early 20th-century social reform discourse transformed the "women's question" into the defining benchmark of Indian social modernity. By mobilizing colonial legal intervention against egregious rites such as sati, female infanticide, and child marriage, while institutionalizing widow remarriage and female education, reformers fractured centuries of orthodox domestic confinement.

However, this legal-administrative push primarily restructured upper-caste domesticity rather than democratizing power, establishing an enduring tension between institutional reform from above and structural, caste-mediated patriarchy from within [37,40]. Reformers such as Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, Swami Dayanand Saraswati, Jyotirao Phule, Savitribai Phule, and Dhondo Keshav Karve mounted sustained challenges against *sati*, child marriage, female illiteracy, and enforced widowhood [38, 39]. Because official colonial education focused on training male clerks and administrators, early female literacy was largely advanced by indigenous social reformers and private educational societies.

Colonial education in nineteenth-century India remained fundamentally elitist and utilitarian, engineered via an English-medium curriculum to cultivate a native administrative clerk class rather than foster broad social empowerment. Consequently, primary schooling, vernacular languages, and female education were systematically sidelined by the imperial state. Against this institutional neglect, indigenous radical thinkers and social reformers—from the Enlightenment-driven Young Bengal movement under Derozio, who mounted early challenges to child marriage and orthodox dogma, to transformative figures like Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, Jyotirao Phule, and Savitribai Phule—assumed the burden of female literacy through grassroots, self-mobilized action, establishing women's education as an indispensable battleground for civil rights, social justice, and national reform(18) The nineteenth- and early twentieth-century reform trajectories spearheaded by figures like

Ram Mohan Roy, Vidyasagar, Dayanand Saraswati, and Karve marked a decisive rupture with orthodox atrocities against women—systematically delegitimizing sati, child marriage, and enforced widowhood while opening formal pathways to education .

However, this emancipatory project was structurally bounded: while reformers eradicated the most lethal expressions of patriarchal violence and provided vital humanitarian rehabilitation, their interventions primarily sought to rehabilitate women into reformed, companionate domesticity and Vedic ideal-types rather than conferring complete individual autonomy (Fuller, 1900; Chaudhuri, 1988).

3. Objective of the Study

This study analyzes and evaluates the policies and structural implications of the British colonial rule on the Indian social, economic and political fabric from the late eighteenth century to the 1850s. It deals with the institutional changes of the period – legal centralization, changes in the education system and legal interventions concerning sati, infanticide and widow remarriage and also describes racial segregation, economic deindustrialization and agrarian drain.

4. Methodology:

The descriptive study methodology was employed to analyze the perception of the British regime toward Indian society. The researcher has depended upon; Secondary sources for collecting of data.

5. Conclusion:

From the very beginning of their contact with India, the British, who came as traders and became rulers and administrators, had influenced the economic and political fabric of the country. Their influence on India's cultural and social life was, however, gradual. Until 1813 they followed the policy of non-interference in the social and cultural life of the Indians. But there were some changes in domains like the situation of women, the caste system, and other social malpractices. Western education and culture. The desire for social and religious reform that emerged in the first decades of the nineteenth century was in part a response to Western education and culture. Some British administrators, influenced by popular liberal principles in the West, attempted to apply them in India. This trend the British government in India followed in its social policies and in the establishment of modern education. The educational system was reformed. It brought the educated people in contact with the modern notions of democracy and nationalism. The press, though heavily constrained, initially played an important role in disseminating contemporary ideas in Indian culture.

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