

Origins of Modernity in South Asia

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Candidate's Declaration

I hereby declare that the thesis presently submitted bearing the title 'Origins of Modernity in South Asia' is the result of my own research and has not been submitted at any other institute for any degree.

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Supervisor's Declaration

I hereby declare that the M.Sc. candidate Mohammed Bokhari has completed his master's essay titled 'Origins of Modernity in South Asia' under my supervision. I recommend it for the submission in candidacy for the degree of Masters in History.

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Mohammed Bokhari

To my parents and siblings, Moaaz, Ashas and Baraira

Introduction

Modernity Defined

Modernity is best conceived as a particular outlook, state of mind or a system of ideas that having evolved gradually in the course of social development, at its core, accept scientific rationality and shun old dogmas and traditions. Modernity is an end state while modernization is a process. Although modernity is synonymous with 'current' and 'contemporary', we shall be taking in a wider meaning of the word than that. In this essay, we will be looking at the two ways modernity affected India: the societal and the individualistic. The former puts society in focus while the latter places more attention on the behaviour and thought patterns of an individual that makes him or her modern. Modernity is very desirable based on the very rapid 'growth' of society.

Modernization signifies a movement from traditional values to modern rationalist values and it has its roots in the spirit of 'rationalism'. It is also a process of secularization, that is, the process by which individuals broke away from the constraints of a tyrannical regime and superstitious society. It is a mass process that brings about fundamental, deep-rooted and widespread change in attitude and behaviour. It is an attempt to lead towards progressivism and better living conditions for people. Of course, the social stratification of people means that its effects cannot reach all sections of society, but for the process to be successful, modernist values need to reach a critical mass of influential members of the population who can bring about the desired change.

Modernization is the profound qualitative and quantitative change which took place in Indian society through a series of interdependent transformations. Although modernity, as it appeared in India, was mostly external, its internal aspect with regard to Indian society and polity has been

ignored and is taken up in this essay. The reason for this neglect is that modernization is seen as a process of enormous institution building in the social, political, economic and other spheres of life. But it is also intimately associated with human personality. Due attention needs to be given to the basic change in the personality of the individuals that make up the society, as we shall see in this essay.

The most important dimensions of modernity are growing urbanization, rise of tolerance as a political and social belief, industrialization, rise of mercantilism and a capitalist economy, mass literacy, representative democracy, increasing role of science and technology. Some of the terms that will be used in the essay follow here. 'Rationalization' is the belief that the world can be understood and managed through a reasonable and logical system of objectivity and testable theories and data. 'Secularization' is the loss of religious influence and/or religious belief at the societal level. 'Universalism', especially 'religious universalism' is the application of ideas and claims to all cultures and circumstances regardless of local distinctions.

Modernity in India

Up until the impact of the West, Indian society was caste-ridden, inward-looking, and worn-out. There had been attempts at bringing about lasting change, which were more than half-hearted attempts in the dark, and these remained largely ineffectual. India's transition to modernization, as we shall see, was a slow and labourious process and it was only until the early part of the nineteenth-century and that too after contact with westernization through the agency of the British that India began to shed her traditional social, political, religious and even economic institutions for newer ones.

The establishment of British Raj in India introduced reason, under the impact of ‘western’ science and philosophy, into the daily habits of Indians which swiftly acquainted not insignificant numbers of them with the meaninglessness of many ancient customs and prejudices hitherto held dearly. This process of westernization created new value systems which enlarged and liberalized the native people’s outlook. This change, however, remained the purview of the elite; the masses continued in their age-old ways.

Time-lapse of South Asia

This is a time-lapse of the seventeenth, eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth centuries that concerns the development of modernity in South Asia, which to the South Asians, as in the rest of the world, was mainly of European origin. In South Asia following the establishment of colonial rule, ‘British’ became synonymous with ‘European’ in the indigenous psyche and was the Indian’s first conception of Western civilization.

Modernity, therefore, came to India through the agency of the British but they were not the first Europeans here, who were the Portuguese. Initial interaction with the Dutch was damaging to the Indians, with traders in ginger and pepper engaging in forcible conversion of a shocked local populace. Ferishta chronicled how they began to plunder pilgrim ships to Mecca whilst Akbar ruled.¹

When, in 1599, the Dutch, who had hitherto been the chief suppliers of spice to England, increased the price of pepper from 3 to 8 shilling a pound, British merchants received a charter from Elizabeth to enter the east. Her successor, James I, approached the Moghul Emperor

¹ Gulfishan Khan, *Indian Muslim Perceptions of the West During the Eighteenth Century* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1998), 42.

Jehangir, whose *firman* opened mainland India to profitable trade. By the end of the century, the East India Company had established factories in Bombay, Calcutta and Madras.

Decline of the Mughal State

After the long reign of Aurangzeb, the Moghul Empire began a steady decline. To many Indian medievalists, Aurangzeb's bigoted policies in a polyglot empire and his extraordinarily long reign coupled with unrelenting military campaigns exhausted imperial coffers. He spent his regal life on horseback, constantly fighting and pushing the frontiers further. This, ironically, did more to damage the empire than make it long-lasting. Within forty years of Aurangzeb's death, it collapsed.² The rulers that succeeded him did not have the acumen to govern a large empire well and were unable to stem the administrative decay that had set in. The authority and prestige of the remaining emperors was irredeemably lost when Persians, Afghans, Marathas, Rohillas, and later, the British would determine who would next take the throne.³

Ghulam Hussain, a sharp-eyed Indian who fought in the Battle of Buxar, would lament that the eighteenth century was 'an age of senseless, slothful princes, and of grandees, ignorant and meddling.'⁴ Siraj ud-Dawla, Mir Qasim, and Mir Jafar, though personally known to him, found dispassionate treatment from his pen, maybe because his personal experience with them was not a happy one.⁵ Abu Talib, another observer, echoed traditional Muslim notions of luxury as the cause of decline of culture and society. It is difficult to say whether he had read the *Muqaddama*,

² *Ibid.*, 1.

³ K. N. Panikkar, *Culture, Ideology, Hegemony: Intellectuals and Social Consciousness in Colonial India* (London: Anthem, 2001), 35.

⁴ Khan, *Indian Muslim Perceptions*, 35.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 91.

the Prolegomena of the great Arab historian and thinker Ibn Khaldun, as we have not discovered any explicit mention of this classical work even in contemporary Indo-Persian literature,⁶ but the conclusions the two were probing for were essentially similar.

Successor States

A patchwork of smaller kingdoms and petty states inherited the territorial expanse of the Mughals in the wake of the Persian monarch Nadir Shah's invasion and sack of Delhi in 1739. Apart from the Marathas, there was no political authority anywhere. Asaf Jah, disloyal and ambitious, maintained himself at Hyderabad. Murshid Ali Khan, the *diwan* of Bengal owed allegiance to the throne only in name.⁷ The Deccan was controlled by Mir Qamar⁸, Oudh by the Nawab-Wazirs⁹, and Mysore by the upstart Hyder Ali.¹⁰

Ascendency of the East India Company

Since the sixteenth century, the East India Company was confined to the beach, and its President John Russel's description of himself as "the smallest particle of sand with his forehead at command rubbed on the ground,"¹¹ had been true for 250 long years. Who would have guessed in 1750 that in just fifty short years, the Company would conquer a third of India with astonishing rapidity. Up until 1748, the Marathas, the last great indigenous military power to

⁶ *Ibid.*, 195.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ K. N., Panikkar, *Asia and Western Dominance: A Survey of the Vasco Da Gama Epoch of Asian History 1498-1945* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1959), 74.

fight the English, were still wrestling for the heritage and prestige of the old Moghul throne. In the 1857 struggle for independence, whatever military organization the Indian side displayed came by the abilities of the remnants of Maratha power: Peshwa Nana Sahib, Tanya Topee and the Rani of Jhansi¹² But all came to naught. The conquest and economic subjugation of India allowed the British in time to subjugate the Manchus in China, industrially revolutionize Britain, and hold sway over the great Pacific and Indian oceans.

But India was not cut off from the rest of the world. Thousands of miles away, two Revolutions affected the Indian political scenario, the American and the French. Abu Talib, the Indian observer we already met briefly, visualized the consequences of the French Revolution in global terms.¹³ Abd al-Latif, another Indian writing on the aftermath of the French Revolution, opined that the British helped the Ottomans against the French because they wanted to secure their possessions in India against the perceived French threat. By occupying Egypt the French wanted to secure a direct passage to India and Napoleon was in negotiation with Tipu Sultan, the potentate of Mysore.

Some Eighteenth Century Indian Muslim Observers

Here we will introduce some early modern Indian observers who visited Europe, especially the British Isles, to understand the nature of the society, culture and political institutions of the power that had come to colonize them and perhaps attempt a comparison and a remedy of the ills of their own society. We will visit them continually through the chapters.

¹² Ibid., 75.

¹³ Khan, *Indian Muslim Perceptions*, 74.

I'tisam al-Din visited Britain in 1767-9 with a letter of the Mughal Emperor Shah Alam for King George III seeking the British monarch's assistance in reinstating the Mughal Emperor on the hereditary throne of Hindustan.¹⁴ His mission naturally floundered because it would have been embarrassing to the designs of the Company if it succeeded.¹⁵ I'tisam al-Din was a deeply religious man. Before and after his visit to England, he was in the service of Major John Carnac in whose army he fought against the combined forces of the Indian princes in the Battle of Buxar; he claims to have written the text of the Treaty of Allahabad that ended the war with the Company.¹⁶ Whilst in England, I'tisam lived in the university town of Oxford for about six months where he helped the famed orientalist William Jones in his Persian studies.¹⁷ He did not have any inclination to learn English—a fact which he deeply regretted when he returned to India.¹⁸

Murtaza Husain Bilgrami's half-century career in service of the Empire was cut short upon Mir Qasim's deposition by the British, whereupon he followed his master into exile in the Rohilla territories of Bareilly and later participated in the Battle of Buxar.¹⁹ Following the Mir's disastrous defeat and the disbandment of his army, Murtaza remained unemployed for almost a decade when in 1776 he was introduced to Captain Johnathan Scott, the Persian secretary of Warren Hastings, who appointed him as one of his *munshis*. Murtaza's scholarly bent satisfied his master's thirst for understanding indigenous customs and traditions while his employer often updated Murtaza's knowledge of the wider world and discussed with him Ottoman-Russian

¹⁴ Ibid., 72.

¹⁵ Ibid., 75.

¹⁶ Ibid., 74.

¹⁷ Ibid., 75.

¹⁸ Ibid., 76.

¹⁹ Ibid., 80.

relations and the expulsion of Muslims from Spain.²⁰ Murtaza was also a deeply religious man with an inclination towards mysticism. He also thought that the deep rot that had set in India was because of a luxurious lifestyle and an unnecessary display of pomp coupled with the reigning monarch Muhammad Shah's inclination towards hair-splitting philosophical deliberations instead of pressing matters of administration.²¹

Ghulam Husain Tabatabai fought in the Battle of Buxar alongside the Muslim potentates and after the defeat met Warren Hastings thrice to secure employment with the Company in Calcutta.²² His autobiographical history, *Siyar al-Muta'akhirin*, or 'History of the Modern Times' was appreciated by Thomas Macaulay and was used by James Mill in writing his *History of British India*.²³ "In fact, the native side of the history of Ghulam Husain Khan's days as it appears in the works of the English writers rests almost entirely upon his authority."²⁴ The book became the subject of William Jones' discourse who took account of the work with a note of admiration for its compiler.²⁵ Ghulam's severe criticism of the Company's policies, his description of the breakdown of the administration and the adverse effects of the dual administration, following the grant of the *Diwani* by Shah Alam to Clive in 1765 were published in the *Asiatic Annual Register*.²⁶

Mir Muhammad Husain's profound interest in science motivated him to visit Europe in 1775, stimulated by close interaction with British officials in Bengal.²⁷ Upon his return he proposed a project of translating European scientific works into Persian for the dissemination of scientific

²⁰ Ibid., 81.

²¹ Ibid., 83.

²² Ibid., 89.

²³ Ibid., 90.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid., 91.

²⁷ Ibid., 93.

knowledge among educated Indians, he was particularly interested in the exposition of Newtonian physics to interested Indians. But his clarion call to enthusiastic intellectual rejuvenation did not evince any response from the notables of the city.²⁸ A non-conformist in religious matters, he invited the wrath of Abd al-Latif, who accused Husain and alleged that his heterodoxy verged on heresy. For others, Husain was nothing short of a veritable Aristotle of Islam (*Arastu-i-Islam*).²⁹ His contributions to the cause of the *Asiatic Society*'s researches were also acknowledged by William Jones.³⁰

During the last decade of the eighteenth-century, advised by a friend to undertake a trip to England to dispel the gloom and despondency of unemployment, the poet Abu Talib visited the country where he even managed to get royal recognition.³¹ In England, popularly known as the 'Persian Prince',³² he socialized with the upper classes, including Warren Hastings, Sir William Ousley (the devoted Persian scholar), the French Orientalist De Sacy, the German Orientalist Hammer-Purgstall³³ and those British officers who had served in India and Abu Talib knew personally. His poetry on English society, London, the historical monuments, St. Paul's Church, River Thames, the India House, the opera-houses, the roads, the market place, coffee houses and play houses, the beauty of English ladies, all gushes with admiration.³⁴ Back in Calcutta in 1803, he began the compilation of the *Masir-i-Talibi* to inform his countrymen of the developments in the West, such as educating children, lifestyle and polite social manners, the system of government, the arts and sciences, which he argued were not necessarily contradictory to the dictates of Islam. These developments to his mind were the reasons for the prosperity of the

²⁸ Ibid., 94.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid., 95.

³¹ Ibid., 97.

³² Ibid., 98.

³³ Ibid., 99.

³⁴ Ibid., 99.

European countries.³⁵ He was frustrated by the widely prevalent but outworn customs among the Muslims throughout the Islamic world. The Muslim upper classes considered their knowledge perfect while the masses were so preoccupied with issues of livelihood that they had no time to acquire philosophical ideas or to explore fresh experiences. The *Masir* remains one of the most comprehensive accounts of the West by an Indian Muslim.³⁶

In his capacity as *wakil* of the Hyderabad state, Abd al-Latif had access to top British officials, including the Governors-General.³⁷ He cultivated contacts with William Jones, William Chambers and others. His long stay in Calcutta enabled him to observe English domestic life—how the ladies and gentlemen dressed, wore their hair, ate and regulated their lives by the watch.³⁸ His magnum opus *Tufat al-Alam* was used by William Ouseley, which he praised quite a lot.³⁹ Abd al-Latif was also a deeply religious man and remained that way.

Ahmad bin Muhammad Bihbahani, born in Iran, reached Bombay in 1805, where he was welcomed by Johnathan Duncan, governor of the city and others on account of the scholarly and religious reputation of his family.⁴⁰ His *Mirat al-Ahwal-i-Jahanuma* or ‘World Reflecting Mirror’ spoke of European systems of government and military organization. His major concern lay in the British occupation of India. His attitude towards the Company occupation was resentful. His interest in European expansion was to find its source of power and thus diagnose the weaknesses of the Muslims. Unlike Abd al-Latif who saw the explanation in well-organized European governments, military technology and scientific developments, Bihbahani like many others lamented the lethargy and moral degradation of the Muslim ruling classes instead.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid., 100.

³⁷ Ibid., 103.

³⁸ Ibid., 104.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 107.

Chapters

The proceeding chapters explore the advent of modernity in South Asia and its effects on society, politics, religion, economy and industry, and science.

In the first chapter, we look at how the influx of Enlightenment ideas into an overwhelmingly traditional and religious Indian society reacted with, and changed, its cultural substratum. Some of these changes were discarded but many were assimilated and even survive to this day. The most important changes, i.e., the emancipation of women, the challenge to caste, and the diffusion of a liberalized public education system, shall be appreciated in greater detail. Suffice to say for now that the first chapter will also be an attempt to show how the various homegrown intellectuals with a modernist bent failed to modernize their society, and although it did not slip into the kind of tradition and conservatism of the preceding centuries, what emerged after the colonial experience had ended in the twentieth-century, was not at all a modern society in the proper sense.

The second chapter explores the social origins of democracy in the Indian subcontinent. It begins by tracing the oft-ignored inklings of democratic character among the ancient and medieval Indian potentates and continues through the colonial period up until independence in 1947. Questions like whether the Indians, left to their own devices, would have developed a form of constitutional government of their own or why democratic institutions were better able to weather the storm of political authoritarianism in India than her neighbour Pakistan will also be explored. India's early flirtation with communism and its failure to take root as well as it did in China will also be touched upon in this chapter.

Religious diversity and the rise of secularism and communal identities are the subjects of the third chapter. India has historically been a home for a diverse number of religions, whether co-existing peacefully or not. Secularism, even in its modern conception, had champions in India in pre-modern times but she failed to develop in that direction wholly and what remains today, as we shall see, is a mere shadow of the idea as it practiced in the West.

The subject of the fourth chapter is the evolution of capitalism, from its methods of primitive accumulation in ancient times, to the half-hearted attempts of the colonial administrators to jumpstart a modern money economy. A large part of the chapter focuses on the writings of Karl Marx, who was a witness and sharp critic of India's subjugation by colonial 'free-traders.' India's development of industry, or the lack thereof, will also be a matter of concern in this chapter. As we shall see, the English were not in India to start an industrial revolution after their own. The drain of wealth, the imposition of opium on China, the iron web of rail, and a plethora of policies, some well-intentioned, others mere afterthoughts, all contributed to the growth of a severely stunted capitalist economy in India; all this and more in the fourth chapter.

The final chapter traces the spread of science and the scientific mode of thinking in India. Colonial ideologues often dismissed ancient and medieval advances in the sciences as the hopeless gropings of a superstitious lot. This is frank racialism at best. Many orientalist writers such as the famous William Jones, and the scientific education imparted by the western institutions established, helped shape the Indian mind, indebteding even giants of the independence movement like Gandhi. However, the introduction of science was not at all easy, or well-intentioned, and the discriminatory policies of colonial power brokers were often greater obstructions to its spread than the ball-and-chain of tradition and superstition that kept India down.

Chapter I: Society

Introduction

Our story begins with the modernist changes that foreground Indian society and culture. In this chapter we will try to see the historical development, if any, of social modernity in India before the coming of the British and then proceed to see social modernity as developed during the colonial period and after.

Pre-modern Indian Society

Eighteenth-century India is often portrayed as a 'dark age', coeval with decadence and decline. This was a time of political fragmentation, when the Mughal Empire had crumbled and no central power held sway over the vast swathes of India. But political fragmentation should not be construed as proof of decline in other spheres of civilization; political fragmentation does not necessarily mean a decline in literary and creative output.¹

The puritanism of the last great Mughal, Aurangzeb, coupled with the financial crises of his successors, had unwittingly forced regional centers, such as Lucknow, Hyderabad and the Rajput states to become spring-wells of a flourishing culture, away from court.² Miniature painting came of age in Rajputna long after the Mughal sun had set. In literature, Mir, Sauda, Bharatchandra

¹ K. N. Panikkar, *Culture, Ideology, Hegemony: Intellectuals and Social Consciousness in Colonial India* (London: Anthem, 2001), 37.

² Panikker, *Culture, Ideology, Hegemony*, 38.

Ray, and Vemana wrote for the consumption of the masses. Urdu sang in belletristic poetry the misfortunes of bygone imperial majesty and Malyalam and Telugu seasoned and opened up to the people.

Herman Goetz, and later others, challenged the bleakness of this opinion by discerning patterns of order in the post-Mughal period.³ It is interesting to note that the Persian chronicles of the period which bemoaned the loss of the golden age were written by members of the elite who had the most to lose when the imperial system crumbled, and whose personal change in fortune was shown as the destruction of society as a whole. Their lament was taken up by British writers in whose interest it was to highlight the chaos of this period for their own ends.⁴

Despite the political and economic decline, however, eighteenth century India was not a cesspool of cultural decay. In fact, this was the most productive period of intellectual development. The rulers of the successor states tried to imitate the Mughals in patronizing artists and scholars. The dispossessed tried to come to terms with their powerlessness by gazing inwards turning to poetry, literature, history and the arts. Every petty clerk was an accomplished poet.⁵ Urdu was fast replacing Persian as the medium of poetical expression in North India. Because the rise of Urdu coincided with the destruction of empire, loss is an important theme in early works, like those of the great Sauda.⁶ Biographical dictionaries and histories were compiled. More than fifty dynastic histories were produced.⁷ Shah Waliullah, writing in Persian and Arabic, initiated the attempt to understand the causes of the destruction of Muslim political preeminence in

³ Khan, *Indian Muslim Perceptions*, 3.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 11.

contemporary India.⁸ Astronomy took off, philosophy, mathematics and medicine flourished. Europeans would still learn from Ibn Sina in the seventeenth century, but in the eighteenth century, translations of European medical works by Indians began to appear.⁹ This was not dissolution and decay; this was cultural regeneration.¹⁰ The true end to indigenous creative ability would come later, brought to India at the business-end of the English musket.

Indian Perceptions of the West

Indians before colonialism had not been totally unaware of the goings on in the West. Observers writing in the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries provide a near-fastidious picture of English social life comparable to what Abbe Le Blanc and Montesquieu wrote.¹¹ Abu Talib was there when the Industrial Revolution had visibly set in and it amazed I'tisam al-Din to see how public theatre and newspapers doubled as organs for political lobbying, in which a disfigured John Bull would caricature a neglectful minister.

Despite this, no direct comparisons of society were offered by the visitors, an ineluctable outcome, because there was very little to compare to with industrialized London. Well-paved roads reminded them of Calcutta; St. Paul's Cathedral resembled the Mausoleum of Sultan Muhammad Shah in Bijapour; the Thames was likened to the Ganges: mere outbreaks of nostalgia.¹²

⁸ *Ibid.*, 13.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Pannikar, *Culture, Ideology, Hegemony*, 43.

¹¹ Ainslie Embree, foreword to *Muslim Women of the British Punjab: From Seclusion to Politics*, by Dushka Saiyid (New York: St. Martin's Press, Inc., 1998), xi.

¹² Dushka Saiyid, *Muslim Women of the British Punjab*, 185.

However, there was careful notetaking otherwise. They commended English willingness to uphold the law, the intellectual's concern with the welfare of the common person, the preference for newer trends, simple living, excellence of mind and the effort to acquire fame and riches, knowledge and skills.¹³ But in the end, their multifarious 'vices' far exceeded whatever virtues they found. Irreligious lower classes lacked integrity and only an undergirded fear of reprisal checked their tendencies to attack the well-to-do. The British had pride verging on haughtiness, an excessive attachment to wealth, desire for comfort and ease, instability of disposition, a quickness to take offence, a Newtonian mechanistic view of the world, a habit of dressing up from top to toe, in no less than twenty-five articles of clothing, and a lack of appreciation of foreign customs. When snobbish dandies accosted Abu Talib for the 'disgusting' Muslim habit of eating with fingers, he countered that a man's own fingers were cleaner than the feet of the baker's boy who usually prepared flour for European bread.¹⁴ Another irritant was the English habit of purchasing inaccurate books, like William Jones' popular titles on Persian grammar for example, with which the pedantic Abu Talib found fault.¹⁵

The observers were touring the West at a time when the incipient idea of the 'Orient' had first appeared in English imagination, manifest in the strong British desire to learn Persian. All of our observers had taught Company employees. In George Swinton Abu Talib found a lasting student-teacher relationship. He also met William Ouseley, Charles Wilkins and William Jones and was invited by the British monarch to found two colleges for Persian which he declined on account of being homesick. Itisam al-Din toured the Oriental collection at Bodleian Library and helped copy *Inrhang-i-Jahangin* for William Jones, who made a fortune by its sale.

¹³ Ibid., 197.

¹⁴ Ibid., 204.

¹⁵ Ibid., 203.

Coming of the British

After conquest, the new colonials soon realized the impossibility of maintaining political power by the force of arms alone because of the vast expanse of territory to be controlled. So, coercion was coupled with persuasion,¹⁶ and colonial administrators sought to project a concurrent image of themselves as being preservers and benefactors of local culture.¹⁷ Even the aggressive imperialist Lord Curzon wanted posterity to remember him as a great preserver of the Indian past.¹⁸

Another strategy which the administrators used as a means of control was the selective appropriation of native culture.¹⁹ Dress regulations were promulgated, especially after the Great Shoe Question,²⁰ when British agents, having usurped the Indian custom of taking one's shoes off before entering a house, tried to enforce it on the Parsi community, for whom being unshod was a violation of religious practice.²¹

The colonized were also denied a valid history by the perpetuated myth of a changeless society.²² The Bengali poet and journalist Bankim Chandra Chatterjee advised to cultivate a native historiography but this came too late for Indians who eventually began to see themselves through colonial prisms.²³ These were the means the new colonials used to subject the attenuated Indian

¹⁶ K. N. Panikkar, *Colonialism, Culture, and Resistance* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2011), 20.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 10.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 79.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*, 122.

²³ *Ibid.*

society to their will. They also came to the pot luck with their own very western perceptions of Indian society which affected native culture indefinitely.

Occidental Perceptions Of Indian Society

“India,” Hegel said, “has existed for millennia in the imagination of the Europeans.”²⁴ That has been true, whether evidenced in Schopenhauer’s obsession with Buddhism or Voltaire’s attempts to compare Saadi’s verses with those of Petrarch.²⁵ For the British coming to India, there were three interrelated approaches to the idea that was India. The first category, the ‘exotocist’, highlighted the wondrous aspects of India, her colourful costumes and religions and the natural state of her peoples.²⁶ India was a provenance of the mythical. Only a handful of Western specialists were aware of Indian contributions to science, mathematics, and medicine. Acceptance of ‘exotocist’ praise made Indian scholars conjure an anti-rationalist past which in turn would lead to more western admiration.²⁷ The second category, the magisterial, promoted imperial chest-thumping and saw India, the ‘great scene of British action,’²⁸ as only a *terra nullis* teeming with subject races and riches. The third curatorial category was the taxonomist and cartographer’s heaven and was all about noting, classifying and exhibiting the diverse aspects of Indian culture.²⁹

Asiatic Society

²⁴ Amartya Sen, *The Argumentative Indian* (New York: Picador, 2006), 141.

²⁵ Khan, *Indian Muslim Perceptions*, 259.

²⁶ Sen, *The Argumentative Indian*, 141.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 155.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 142.

The Royal Asiatic Society of Bengal was set up in India in the colonial spirit of part exoticism, part curatorial-ism and part appropriation-ism and was the brainchild of William Jones. Because of his many contributions, Jones has become to many the putative progenitor of the revolution of the Indian mind.³⁰ He came to India in 1783 with the sanguine intentions of staying only six years, long enough to gain financial independence.³¹ He would never leave. No mean scholar, he declared his ambition to know India better than any other European had ever known her.³² He was the Society's president until his death. It remained committed to the preservation of the Indian past by a dedicated number of British orientalist whose ranks grew over the decades. *Asiatick Researches*, the institution's flagship journal, appeared in 1788.³³

The Indian Renaissance

Slowly over time, eighteenth-century native society, stubbornly recalcitrant at first, began to interact more freely and open up to the colonials, and a flux of ideas soon began. This interaction, mostly with British officials and missionaries, was centered at Bengal and has been dubbed the 'Indian Renaissance.' It gradually started to be most associated with the creation of a new western-educated intelligentsia, employed mostly as teachers, journalists, lawyers and lowly civil servants.³⁴

Despite the use of the word 'renaissance', there are a number of reasons that distinguish the Indian Renaissance fundamentally from the European one. The issues addressed were

³⁰ Subrata Dasgupta, *Awakening: The Story of the Bengal Renaissance* (New Delhi: Random House, 2011), 25.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 35.

³² Panikkar, *Culture, Colonialism, Resistance*, 145.

³³ Dasgupta, *Awakening*, 27.

³⁴ Amiya Sen, *Rammohun Roy: A Critical Biography* (New Delhi: Penguin, 2012), 22.

dissimilar.³⁵ Some scholars would even question the use of the word in the Indian experience because it does not resemble the great intellectual awakening as it happened in Europe.³⁶ But perhaps such fundamental transformation may never have been part of its agenda to begin with.

However, the middle classes, in the Renaissance and Enlightenment of East and West, were totally dependent on the service sector of the colonial administration for sustenance.³⁷

Also, in both oriental and occidental experience, it was organized top-down. It was never a grassroots movement, the result of a social upsurge by the awakened masses. A parochial desire to resist the foreigner drove it, not hunger for social progress. Brahmans who trumpeted for the abolition of untouchability did so for national strength, not for revolutionary change.³⁸

Nor did social reform in India or the West for that matter, necessarily mean the benefit of underprivileged classes.³⁹ It was the infusion of a new way of life and thought into the existing social structure. Also, despite the large number of western educated persons in southern India, no reformer of national standing was ever produced and social reform there remained weak.⁴⁰

Yet the experience introduced young India to the heady wine of Mill, Spencer, Rousseau and Tom Paine and ultimately laid the ambition for a capitalist, bourgeois order as the logical outcome of British rule.⁴¹ Indian intellectuals as they emerged soon prized European humanism, scientific knowledge, political institutionalism, and economic development for their progressive nature. But their callow esteem for the West was without due appreciation of the social

³⁵ Panikkar, *Colonialism, Culture, Resistance*, 133.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid., 142.

³⁸ K. N. Panikkar, *Asia and Western Dominance* (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1980), 237.

³⁹ Ghanshyam Shah, *Social Movements in India: A Review of Literature* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2007), 225.

⁴⁰ Shah, *Social Movements in India*, 225.

⁴¹ Panikkar, *Colonialism, Culture, Resistance*, 65.

conditions that led to these attributes in the first place.⁴² Overwhelmed with everything English, Anglicized *babus* sported double-breasted suits and ties in hot and sultry Indian summers, learned to waltz and foxtrot in dancing halls, measured their social prestige by the number of invitations to the governor's banquets⁴³ and prayed for the success of the British when the Mutiny raged in north India.⁴⁴ Regardless, obeisance to colonial culture and ideology did not filter down to the popular level through this newly created class and the contrariety of the *babu* was never accepted as an ideal by the common person.⁴⁵

The Reformers

The Indian Renaissance, like its European counterpart, was helped along by intellectual leaders. These were men (and a few women) whose thinking had been shaped by ideas emanating in the West. They were essentially “non-conformists critical of existing social conditions and performing the social function of propagation of ideas with a view to bringing in social and political progress and advancement.”⁴⁶ They were not limited to a paucity of elite activists as is often believed but comprised a large number of lesser-known people engaged in the elaboration and dissemination of ideas.⁴⁷ The process of formation of a community of intellectuals, cutting across religious and caste barriers thus began at the beginning of the nineteenth-century. All shared liberal bourgeois ideas, except in the twentieth century when a small section was drawn towards Marxism. Many among the reformers first cut their political teeth by being part of social

⁴² Panikkar, *Culture, Ideology, Hegemony*, 59.

⁴³ Panikkar, *Colonialism, Culture, Resistance*, 48.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 51.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 48.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 63.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

and cultural organizations and voluntary associations established by colonial officials, such as the Calcutta School Book Society and the Horticultural Society.⁴⁸

The formative educational influence of the reformers was of two kinds: traditional, or a combination of traditional and western. Radhakanta Deb, Dayanand Saraswati and Narayana Guru belonged to the first category; Rammohan Roy, Vivekananda, Bal Gangadhar Tilak and Jawaharlal Nehru belonged to the second.⁴⁹ The latter lot, excluding Roy, experimented with western learning before revisiting traditional roots. Vivekananda left European philosophy for the company of the great guru Ramakrishna Paramahansa, Tilak took to the *Gita* and Nehru, despite a Cambridge education, “had to attempt a discovery of India to discover himself.”⁵⁰ This ‘reversion’ to the traditional was necessary if they were to rise above being mere public intellectuals cut off from their people and assume the social and political leadership of the masses.⁵¹ Else, they may have remained at the lowly plane of that breed of reviled native epigones, the *babus*.

Despite the differences between the two groups, their vision for a society was similar. It would also be wrong to assume that only a western education led to progressive thinking. The conservative Sanskrit scholar Radhakanta Deb was a champion of female education and Narayana Guru, a renowned ascetic, was a caste abolitionist.⁵² Dayanand Saraswati, who founded the *Arya Samaj*, a Hindu reform movement, made no effort to acquire European learning, which in no way left him stunted. He became a radical reformer after years of

⁴⁸ Ibid., 88.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 65.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 67.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid., 69.

impatience as a *sanyasi*. As an apocryphal story goes, he dissected a corpse to verify information contained in religious scripture and upon finding it false, flung codex and corpse into a river.⁵³

One question that remains is whether Indians such as these could have developed progressive ideas all by themselves. Akshay Kumar Dutt and Veeresalingam, as we shall see in the chapters to come, derived the idea of an organic theory of society and Rammohan Roy and Naryana Guru wrote on religious universalism.⁵⁴ Nevertheless, the pre-nationalist intellectuals of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were the convenient heralds, the bugle-blowers, to the nationalist struggle to come.⁵⁵

Rammohan Roy

Perhaps the most iconic of all social reformers, retired revenue officer of the Company, Raja Rammohan Roy, ‘Bharatpathik’ or ‘traveler on Indian roads’ as Rabindranath Tagore called him,⁵⁶ has been lionized by posterity one minute, and has had his theories debunked the next.⁵⁷ A Brahman by birth, he was a scholar of religion, politics, law, constitutions and civic rights.⁵⁸ Roy believed in adapting to the Indian clime the moral and material changes that altered the face of Europe, hoping one day his “humble endeavours will be viewed with greater justice, perhaps acknowledged with gratitude”.⁵⁹

⁵³ Panikkar, *Culture, Ideology, Hegemony*, 68.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 69.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 78.

⁵⁶ Sen, *Rammohun Roy*, 27.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 26.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 1.

Because of his championing the English language and western-style institutions, Mohandas Gandhi was led to remark that, compared with pre-modern figures like Acharya Sankara, Kabir, Chaitanya or Nanak, Roy was a mere dwarf, and that his modern western education distanced him from the masses.⁶⁰ This critique precluded the fact that Roy had creatively used the vernacular to democratize knowledge that had been till then been the captive of upper caste society.⁶¹

Roy uncritically accepted the regenerative character of British rule, perhaps after having read the vitriolic colonialist history of the Scottish political theorist James Mill. Mill's book, the *History of British India*, was published in 1817 and on the strength of which he was appointed as an official in service of the East India Company.⁶² This failing, of blindly accepting colonial disparagement of Indian history, was not personal of Roy but representative of the class to which he belonged.⁶³ Enamoured by British culture, he “maintained two houses in Calcutta, one for entertaining his European friends and the other for his family to live in. In the first house, everything was European except Rammohan Roy and in the second everything except Rammohan Roy was Indian.”⁶⁴

However, Roy continued to identify with his Brahman status throughout his life. The ‘progenitor of modernity’ in his mother country, he insisted on wearing the sacred thread representative of his caste, and was even careful enough to take a cook with him when he visited England.⁶⁵

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid., 4.

⁶² Sen, *The Argumentative Indian*, 146.

⁶³ Sen, *Rammohun Roy*, 22.

⁶⁴ Panikkar, *Culture, Ideology, Hegemony*, 1.

⁶⁵ Panikkar, *Colonialism, Culture, Resistance*, 140.

Vidyasagar

Ishwar Chandra was an educationist, writer, feminist and social reformer who championed humanist causes without (unlike Roy) appealing to a theocratic frame of reference.⁶⁶ His humanism was cerebral and practical and this pattern of thought, by an Indian thinker, challenges the notion that modern humanism is a product solely of the West.⁶⁷ An unhappy childhood was peppered with kindness from strangers, especially women, which drove him to see their plight in a different light. These acts of humanity made him the humanist and feminist he was to become.

He remained a student at the Sanskrit College for twelve years, where because of diligent hard work he earned the title ‘Vidyasagar’.⁶⁸ He left the College a master in Sanskrit law and began teaching at Fort William College and in the meantime, wrote small, biographical life-sketches which introduced the Bengali masses to the wider world of western *Bodhodaya* or Enlightenment.⁶⁹ These pieces were written on people like Copernicus, Galileo, Newton, Herschel, Linnaeus, and even William Jones.⁷⁰ He also translated into prose Shakespeare’s *Comedy of Errors*.⁷¹

Vidyasager was a passionate advocate of women’s rights and wrote against hypergamy, an over-the-top form of polygamy, and even went so far as publishing lists of village Brahmans with more than sixty wives.⁷² In the case of widow remarriage, he appealed to the *shastras*, like Roy did for *sati*, to counter fundamentalist Hindu rebuttals. The first edificatory pamphlets he ventured to publish on the subject sold out within weeks, but this rapidly earned him the ire of

⁶⁶ Dasgupta, *Awakening*, 202.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 203.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 210.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 217.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 216.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 220.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 222.

the indefatigable Radhakanta Deb.⁷³ Such actions put his life in danger but he soon won the day when the Widow Remarriage Act was passed in 1856. He was even delighted when his own son Narayan chose to marry a widow.⁷⁴ In spite of the Act, and forty years since then, so few widow remarriages took place that a defeated Vidyasagar accepted that Hindu society was not yet willing to recognize them.⁷⁵ Many later even condemned him for being a ‘failed’ reformer.⁷⁶

Vivekananda

Narendranath Datta Vivekananda was born into a prosperous Bengali family. His formal education was steeped in the western texts of Hume, Mill, Comte, Darwin and Schopenhauer, and he even corresponded with Spencer on occasion.⁷⁷ His preparations for a law degree went awry when he came into the company of the mystic Ramakrishna Paramhansa.⁷⁸ The contrast between disciple and guru couldn’t have been greater. He imbibed from Ramakrishna a kind of monism and after the monk’s death, embarked on a wandering journey through the length and breadth of India. It was on this excursion that he came into contact with the plight of the poor. His visit to Chicago in 1893, to attend the Congress of Religions was an attempt to project the exotic East while he sought means to ameliorate the material condition of the poor of India.⁷⁹ He

⁷³ Ibid., 225.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 226.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 227.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 377.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 378.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 384.

quickly became a celebrity there, even meeting luminaries such as William James and Nikola Tesla.⁸⁰

False Consciousness

The aforementioned intellectual failings of Roy and some other members of the fledgling comity of intellectuals was largely because of a misplaced adoration of the panoplies of western progress. Today, this is termed in academic circles as a ‘false consciousness,’ an illusion which stunted an indigenous body of thought that could have found solutions to indigenous society’s problems. Instead, there was a scramble for Tom Paine. Nineteenth-century Indian intellectuals found themselves trapped unawares in the torpidity of agreeing with the colonial metanarrative of Britain’s civilizing mission and failed to perceive the great chasm that separated the ideas at their source, the metropolis, and the colony. It was vital for the intellectuals to realize that there could be no convergence of liberal principles and institutions at home and in the periphery.⁸¹ While western ideas were undoubtedly an influence in awakening the Indian mind, nonetheless “foreign conquest and domination was bound to be a hindrance rather than a help to subject people’s regeneration.”⁸²

Why did the intellectuals fail to realize the nature of colonial rule? The answer to that question is interesting. British policy mystified the reality of colonial domination and imbricated myths upon myths about the colonized Indians which the Indians themselves began to believe. Deception, dishonesty and undependability began to characterize the self-image of Indians,

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Panikkar, *Culture, Ideology, Hegemony*, 60.

⁸² Ibid., 61.

which persists among the English-educated elite to this day. Roy, sensitive to this typecasting, pointed out that, “the peasants or villagers who reside at a distance from large towns . . . are as innocent, temperate and moral in their conduct as the people of any country whatsoever.”⁸³

The intellectuals thus developed an idealized view of the colonial state, especially when recalling the chaos of the years preceding British rule. The instrumentality of the British, the ‘Liberator of Europe’ and their divine dispensation, was paramount in their thinking.⁸⁴ Roy’s England was a nation of people not only “blessed with the enjoyment of civil and political liberty but who also interest themselves in promoting liberty and social happiness as well as free inquiry into literary and religious subjects among those nations to which their influence extends.”⁸⁵ However, the contradiction in exploitative colonial rule and the liberal ethos it espoused soon gave rise to a different perception.

Traditional Challenge

The coming of social and cultural modernity to India, because of its foreignness was not immediately welcome. Modern ideas, especially the ones that challenged traditional notions of society and culture were resisted in many ways. One form of resistance was emphasis on the vernacular, not wholly devoid of glorification of past achievements which soon embraced almost every field: medicine, technology, music, drama, political systems, and the condition of women.⁸⁶ This was an attempt to prove Indian superiority in all fields. Vernacularization was a shift to the Indian. It is perhaps epitomized in the legend of Lord Krishna, who preferred the

⁸³ Ibid., 71.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 72.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 73.

⁸⁶ Panikkar, *Colonialism, Culture, Resistance*, 72.

devotions of a vernacular scholar, Punthanam, to the Sanskrit litanies of Meppathur Bhattatiripad.⁸⁷

The biggest reaction to modernity in India was its foreignness which is surprising given the fact that Indian society has eagerly absorbed material from elsewhere for millennia. To quote an oft-repeated example, the fact that chili, the basic ingredient of Indian cooking, was brought to India by the Portuguese from the New World does not make Indian cooking any less Indian!⁸⁸

However, that is not a good example. Chili is a cooking ingredient, whose delectableness is determined by the palate. Our concern is with ideas and the transformative impact they had on the Indian mind. We know for a fact that the Mughals were introduced to the printing press by missionaries. The technology was instrumental in transforming the intellectual landscape of Europe over time and the same could have happened in India. Instead, the Mughal era elite were more interested in preserving the craft of elaborate illumination and beautifying the texts, as well as preserving the source of livelihood for the scribes and rejected the printing press out of hand with stark consequences down the centuries.

Tagore versus Gandhi

The skirmish between modernity and tradition is best typified in the differing points of view of two giants in nineteenth-century thought leadership, Rabindranath Tagore and Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 99.

⁸⁸ Sen, *The Argumentative Indian*, 132.

Tagore, who was forward-looking, had the greatest admiration for Gandhi as a shrewd political mobilizer, not a traditional politician.⁸⁹ Tagore stood for contraception, family planning, human reason, modern science and technology, all which Gandhi opposed.⁹⁰ “I blamed Mahatmaji,” he said on occasion, “for exploiting the irrational force of credulity in our people which might have had a quick result [in creating] a superstructure while stopping the foundation. Thus began my estimate of Mahatmaji as a guide of our nation and it is fortunate for me that it did not end there.”⁹¹ The poet never tired of criticizing the *charka* (a bizarre quotidian which Gandhi insisted everyone spin for thirty minutes each day) because the antiquated invention never required anyone to think.⁹² And thinking was what Tagore was all about. (“Poems I can spin, Gandhiji, songs and plays I can spin, but of your precious cotton what a mess I would make!”)⁹³ He lambasted the simplistic “epistemology implicit in seeing the 1944 Bihar earthquake as caused by ethical failure,” the very connection Gandhi made with regards to the untouchability campaign.⁹⁴

A progressive no doubt, Tagore was not without condemning the British where he felt it was due. He kept a clear difference between the Raj, which he criticized, and British culture, features of which, like Byron’s poetry or liberal politics, he upheld.⁹⁵ In contrast, we have Gandhi’s familiar *bon mot* about western civilization, with which we are too acquainted to repeat here. Above all, Tagore feared his people’s rejection of the West for tradition would turn into hostility of any foreign influence.

⁸⁹ Sen, *The Argumentative Indian*, 99.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 104.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 99.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 101.

⁹³ Reba Som, *Gandhi, Bose Nehru and the Making of the Modern Indian Mind* (London: Viking, 2004), 80.

⁹⁴ Sen, *The Argumentative Indian*, 104.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 107.

Alternative Modernity

All the same, traditional or not, synthesis with the West became the credo of all modernists who hoped to rejuvenate Indian society. The only question was to what *degree* need synthesis take place? Men like Mohandas Gandhi, the ‘critical traditionalists’ hoped India would birth institutions, influenced by the West, but rooted in traditional genius.⁹⁶ ‘Critical modernists’ like Nehru, fired by the ideas of the Enlightenment, emphasized the role of modern technology and industrialization.⁹⁷

Yet there was a middle ground, the path of an alternative modernity, neither western nor traditional. The intelligentsia began to selectively appropriate and synthesize, in public discourse, the traditional and the western. The ‘product’ of such doings was beyond bland imitation or alienation from either the indigenous or colonial. Either way, alternative modernity was a solution to the crisis⁹⁸ and a form of resistance as an alternative to colonialism⁹⁹ and was seen as a halfway point between the penumbra of tradition and a liberal order of the future. Of course, one could argue that that would not be modernity at all. The problem was that the creation of an alternative modernity remained the purview of the elite.¹⁰⁰ The whole process was blighted in the end and the ‘westernized but not modernized’ Indian became more traditional than the traditional Indian. Alas, East and West did meet after all!¹⁰¹

⁹⁶ Som, *Gandhi, Bose, Nehru*, 79.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

⁹⁸ Panikkar, *Colonialism, Culture, Resistance*, 13.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 15.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 16.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 50.

There are amusing instances of the lengths to which some Indians would go to toss up a traditional and modern salad. Some, like Rabindranath Tagore's elder brother, Jyotindranath Tagore, attempted a synthesis in his dress by wearing a combination of dhoti, suit, cap and tie. It was so awesome that no person of ordinary sartorial courage could sport it in public!¹⁰²

Cultural and Political Reform

Whilst the cultural and social reform was underway, political reform was not. Historically, political and social reform in India proceeded separately. Many among the intelligentsia asked whether it was more desirable for social reform to precede political reform or whether they should go in tandem. Gandhi maintained that liberation from colonial rule would remain incomplete unless social and cultural emancipation of the natives of India proceeded apace with the political.¹⁰³ But in the end, even Gandhi failed to combine cultural regeneration within the fold of the national movement and the two moved independently of each other¹⁰⁴ until the political movement started to go from strength to strength while the cultural struggle became weaker and weaker.

The reason for the ultimate demise of cultural regeneration and its disconnect with the independence movement was because many who supported the latter were unable or unwilling to shed prior cultural practices and societal norms. The eradication of untouchability, for example, is an expression of this divergence. The backward mind, in the end, succeeded in overcoming and dominating the popular mind. Politics failed to transform culture and was instead

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 81.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 52.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 52.

transformed by it.¹⁰⁵ This tendency was not sudden but developed over time, terminating in the moribund communal politics of the Hindu Mahasabha and the Muslim League, and the fateful partition of Pakistan.¹⁰⁶

Emancipation of Women

Perhaps the most important aspect of the modernist change was the new way with which the role of women's role in Indian society began to be perceived. Indian women's resistance to male domination has conventionally been seen as a product of western education. This notion has recently begun to be questioned. Upper caste women's occupation, albeit circumscribed to domestic duties, was never 'inferior' because domestic work was crucial to the maintenance of caste purity.¹⁰⁷ On the contrary, Indian cultural traditions, such as male-female equality in ancient Vedic themes¹⁰⁸ demonstrate a tremendous potential to liberate women from subordinate positions.¹⁰⁹ The Congress Party and the All-India Women's Conference organized movements for political rights and equal franchise for women.

But there is a different side to the picture as well. The number of high status individuals in such organizations meant a low level threat to the system and early women's movements would attempt to improve women's performance in traditionally female roles.¹¹⁰ Also, women's inclusion in the freedom movement may not have been an act of equality but tolerated only

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 53.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Shah, *Social Movements in India*, 147.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 154.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 148.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

because nonviolent struggle came easily to them.¹¹¹ Most of the abovementioned reformers wanted to encourage monogamy and the nuclear family, not necessarily female emancipation in its modern conception.¹¹² This train of thought has continued to this day.

Before Modernist Intervention

The idea of an independent woman, a far cry from the *Pativrata* or devoted and chaste wife,¹¹³ was slow to take root in the Indian subcontinent. Let us backtrack to our Indian observers momentarily. Visiting the strange occident in the eighteenth-century, they described the institutions of courtship, pre-marital relations, and contractual marriages in vivid detail, all the while condemning gaudy French Mademoiselles who were the first to give up the veil. They also observed limits to women's emancipation. Despite social inter-mixing, the Georgian era women dared not go out of the house without being chaperoned by a male relative. It became apparent to Abu Talib that underneath the sham liberty, the women were not completely free, which suited him, and Abd al-Latif and Ahamd bin Muhammad, who disputed total freedom. Muslim women on the other hand, their minds reasoned, were sovereign in their households despite the practice of *purdah*.

It was during the prolonged interaction of Indian society with the British that a fundamental shift in attitude towards the tenebrous status of women began. Reformers like Rammohan Roy and

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 155.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 155.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*

Vivekenanda took up the baton for change. To the Hindus the issues were widow remarriage, for Muslims the education of women and the nature of *pardah*.¹¹⁴

Purdah

Purdah was a matter of some sensitivity to the Muslim community in India. The patriarchal institution called for the complete segregation of the female sex from male society and enforced this by sequestering women to a domestic setting. The burden was borne mostly by *shurafa* woman; to the peasant woman, enjoined with work in the fields, any kind of physical restriction was impracticable.¹¹⁵

With the modernist shift, however, many western-educated men, such as Syed Ameer Ali began to question the wisdom of the practice. Ali has been quoted arguing that “the Quran itself affords no warrant for holding that the seclusion of women is part of the new gospel.”¹¹⁶ There were others who contended that the physical confinement of Muslim women in India may have been as alien to the women of Muhammad’s time as to the present-day western woman. In their defense, there had been a tradition in Islam of women accompanying the men to the battlefield to egg them on.

The custom of the *hijab*, an extension of the *pardah*, was implemented in year 5 of the Hijra, and may have been as a result of Muhammad’s years of constant setbacks after the defeat at Uhud, because of which Muslim women were being harassed in the streets.¹¹⁷ The modernist Muslim

¹¹⁴ Saiyid, *Muslim Women of the British Punjab*, 20.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 5

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 63.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*

counter often goes that *hijabic* instructions did not cramp the style of Ayesha, one of the more influential wives of Muhammad, who rode to war with Ali on the back of a camel. Neither did it bother the bold Sukayna, daughter of Ali's son Hussain. She opposed the Umayyads throughout her life, debated in mosques, divorced, and set down in her marriage contract that her husband would not have the right to polygamy or her obedience.¹¹⁸

Purdah remained a hot topic throughout the intellectual and freedom movements. Slowly into the twentieth-century, the idea that the archaic institution had to give way gripped the minds of an increasing number of Muslim men. By the time the firebrand poet Sarojini Naidu visited Lahore to attend the session on women's education at the Islamic Education Conference in Lahore 1917, *purdah* had become touchstone for the movement for the emancipation of women. There she gave a rousing speech which instantiated the need to liberate women from compulsory segregation. It is interesting and revealing of the ferment that she was invited to speak at all and that she used a religious argument to move what must have been primarily a Muslim male audience on whose shoulders (very much unlike Syed Ahmed Khan as we shall see) she put the responsibility for the Muslim women's condition.¹¹⁹

Sati

The Hindus meanwhile had an altogether different problem: burning widows alive. Mythically, Sati was the daughter of king Daksha and preferred to give up her life than allow her eccentric husband, Shiva, to be humiliated by her father. Through this selfless act she became the supreme, virtuous wife.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 64.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 76.

To the Hindus, the wife was *ardhangini*, the site where the spirit of her deceased husband lived.¹²⁰ This dissuaded her from remarrying and encouraged her instead to immolate herself. Witnessing the rite brought religious merit ten million times greater than the *asvamedha yajna* (Vedic horse sacrifice) and cured society of the irredeemable weakness of women: sexual promiscuity in the absence of a husband.¹²¹

Sati, like *pardah*, was associated with higher castes. In the lower castes, the value of female labor was too considerable to be assigned to the dereliction of the flames. The practice had sanction since historic times. In medieval India, Akbar and the Peshwas in Maharashtra had made unsuccessful attempts to stop the practice¹²². The coming of the colonials also played an unwitting role in peaking the custom. British power brought material power to menial agricultural castes in Bengal who began declaring their newfound status to society by burning widows.¹²³ Poverty was also a moving factor, or the prospects of a long and lonely life; sixty year-old *satis* were not a peculiar sight.¹²⁴ In the beginning Lord Charles Cornwallis had dismissed action against the custom on grounds of religious sanction and that Muslim administrations in the past had tolerated it. Diehard abolitionists had to wait until 1829 for the imprimaturs of William Bentinck, ‘Legislator of the Hindoos,’¹²⁵ when the state felt safe enough from popular revolt to outlaw the custom once and for all.¹²⁶ Many people know the remark of one famous British officer in the 1840s, in reply to Brahmans who argued that *sati* was a national custom: “My nation also has a custom. When men burn women alive, we hang them. . . . Let us

¹²⁰ Sen, *Rammohun Roy*, 95.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 101.

¹²² *Ibid.*, 105.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, 102.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 104.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 95.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 94.

all act according to national customs.” (The remark is attributed to Sir Charles Napier, conqueror of Sindh in 1843.)

Infanticide and Child Marriage

Infanticide was another Indian ‘custom’ that needed remedying. British officers posted to outlying areas became aware of whole villages devoid of daughters because high marriage costs and a Rajput code of disgrace for the father giving less than the required amount created a preference of slaughtering hapless female children.

Kulinism had originally emerged and gained traction in higher caste societies in an attempt to keep the bloodline pure but degenerated into child marriage and polygamy.¹²⁷

British Attitude Toward The Position Of Women

British power, dependent on the goodwill of the agricultural classes, especially after the Mutiny of 1857, sided with conservative elements of society, and was used without compunction to maintain the status quo that kept the women of India deprived of their rights.¹²⁸ The Punjab Laws Act when passed gave custom the force of law without defining the nature of custom.¹²⁹

Syed Ahmed Khan

¹²⁷ Suresh Gosh, *The History of Education in Modern India, 1757-1998* (New Delhi: Orient Longman, 2000), 13.

¹²⁸ Saiyid, *Muslim Women of the British Punjab*, 19.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*

Syed Ahmed Khan, perhaps the most progressive Muslim reformer of his time, was a conservative with women's emancipation. While cultivating young Muslim men to abandon Persian and Arabic, he encouraged Muslim women to stay home and study moral books like the Quran, the Hadith, Rumi or *Tuzk-i-Jahangiri*. The reason for this dichotomy was that, men unlike women had to earn a living. He spoke at length against trying to imitate European schools for girls that prepared students for employment as postmasters or as members of parliament, the reason being that India was not likely to have those conditions for a long time to come. In his journal *Scientific Society* he condemned the torpid condition of the contemporary Indian Muslim woman but without any prescription of the malaise.

G. W. Leitner, a German educationist working in India, who helped establish the Government College and Punjab University, shared Khan's views. He alleged that opening government schools would only vitiate the indigenous education system because girls were just not willing to enroll. He suggested that until there was a demand for educated wives, female schools should be abolished.¹³⁰

However, the Anjuman-i-Himayat-i-Islam opened neighborhood schools for girls in Lahore in the mid-1880s despite a great deal of opposition by the more conservative sections of Muslim society. The Anjuman tried to remove the prejudice Khan had sown. Sultan Jahan Begum of Bopal, the Amir of Afghanistan, and the Nizam of Hyderabad became powerful patrons of the Anjuman.¹³¹

Mumtaz Ali and Altaf Hali

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 45.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 53.

Younger men like Mumtaz Ali and the poet Altaf Hussein Hali, sensitive of the jarring lampoons of Islamic society by Christian missionaries, were moved to write about Muslim women in a different vein. Khan naturally disapproved of Ali's radical new book, *Huquq-un-Niswan* (The Rights of Women), written in the style of a *munazra* – scathing jabs of wit and humor traded between Christian and Muslim apologists. He had seen these growing up and they had deeply influenced him.¹³²

Hali was Khan's contemporary but twenty years his junior. His *Majlis-un-Nisan* (Assemblies of Women) in 1874 was recommended for a literary prize by the director of Public Instruction in Punjab and was adopted as a textbook in girls' schools. Close work with English texts made Hali acutely aware of the differences in the roles of Western and Indian women. His stirring poem *Chup Ki Dad* or 'Homage to the Silent', made Khan look like a boor in comparison.¹³³ The poem was a rallying cry for female educationists.

Deputy Nazir Ahmed

The first Urdu novelist, Deputy Nazir Ahmed, did not call attention to women's plight in the manner of Hali but spun stories showing the benefits of education for women in their traditional role of mother and wife. He represented a newer generation of Muslims seeking compromise between the traditional culture and the demands made on it by the government.¹³⁴ Ahmed's hero, Asghari, is a woman who all but runs the life of her husband but does so with tact. She is not

¹³² *Ibid.*, 52.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, 68.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, 72.

content to remain a housewife and opens a school at home.¹³⁵ Nazir Ahmad must have found the inspiration for such a character from historical figures of Indian Muslim history such as Nur Jehan and Razia Sultana.¹³⁶

Chandu Menon

A colonial official, Menon wrote *Indulekha*, a Malayali novel about two lovers, Madhavan and Indulekha, but which was essentially a representation of how Indians were trying to come to terms with colonial modernity,¹³⁷ especially marriage reform. *Indulekha*'s spirited defense of gender equality gave voice to the tacit opinions of women who loathed patriarchal control of women's sexuality and independence.¹³⁸ The novel was intensely popular with readers and sold out within months.

Mohammed Iqbal

When Iqbal has written so much besides, only nine short poems on women give some indication of his lack of interest in the subject. 'Protection of Women', exactly three verses long, argues that no education sought by coming out of *purdah* can safeguard the security of women.¹³⁹ Iqbal dealt a blow to the cause of women's emancipation by insisting that first men had to undergo

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, 75.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, 76.

¹³⁷ Pannikar, *Colonialism, Culture, Resistance*, 146.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, 161.

¹³⁹ Saiyid, *Muslim Women of the British Punjab*, 82.

change or find their *khudi* before women could hope for any improvement to their lot in life.¹⁴⁰ Those nations that did not comprehend something as basic as this soon saw to their own demise.¹⁴¹

The Campaign against Sati

The greatest contribution to abolishing the most draconian of all cultural practices was that of Rammohan Roy's struggle to eradicate *sati*. According to legend, as a lad, Rammohan witnessed his elder brother Jagmohan's burnt wife try and scramble off a burning pyre, but despite the poor woman's shrieks, she was held down by bamboo poles.¹⁴² His attempts to rescue her were intercepted and thus having failed, he vowed on the spot to rid society of the evil.¹⁴³ This story may as well be apocryphal because Roy was in Rangpur at the time and could have in no way witnessed the events as they folded.¹⁴⁴ Nevertheless, the campaign against *sati* that he led finally gave the British government the strong Brahman voice it was looking for. As for Roy, he would hereon walk the streets of Calcutta flanked by friends who doubled as bodyguards.¹⁴⁵

In his tracts, written much like a Socratic dialogue, he used three arguments to impugn the legitimacy of *sati*. First, he equated *sati* with suicide, an act condemned in Hindu scripture.¹⁴⁶ Second, he argued that coveting heaven as a reward was petty, *kamya karma*, instead of a selfless

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

¹⁴² Sen, *Rammohun Roy*, 107.

¹⁴³ Ibid., 108.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 93.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 109.

existence, *nishkam karma* which led to *moksha*.¹⁴⁷ Finally, destroying the stereotype of the promiscuous female, he said promiscuity was known to develop in women even with a husband; therefore, *sati* could not be an effective solution.¹⁴⁸

The agitation over *sati* stirred the contentious acrimony of Radhakanta Deb. He and Roy entered into open confrontation. Deb was more concerned with changes forced onto society from the outside without ample time to adjust (remarkably, the past three thousand years having been quite insufficient!). This is surprising given that he was a champion of the even more radical idea of female education, a cause which moved several of his supporters to desert his *dal*.¹⁴⁹ Whatever the case, “tradition was not the ground on which the status of women was being contested; rather, the reverse was true: women became the site on which tradition was debated. What was at stake was not woman but tradition.”¹⁵⁰ Traditionalists even hijacked a slogan used by the women’s liberation movements: ‘*hum Bharat ki nari hain, phool nahi, chingari hain!*’¹⁵¹

Roy, despite his relentless attacks on the practice, was a deeply cautious man. In a private meeting with Bentinck, he hoped the police would quietly suppress custom without there being a public showdown between the modernists and traditionalists.¹⁵² That may have been tactful because just before the abolition, *sati* was really on the decline.¹⁵³ But when the government came out with the ban, it was protested by the *Dharma Sabha*, a collection of Calcutta’s orthodox, who hired a lawyer to petition the Privy Council in Britain.¹⁵⁴ Roy’s presence in

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 110.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 111.

¹⁴⁹ Panikkar, *Culture, Ideology, Hegemony*, 89.

¹⁵⁰ Panikkar, *Colonialism, Culture, Religion*, 124.

¹⁵¹ Shah, *Social Movements in India*, 150.

¹⁵² Sen, *Rammohun Roy*, 115.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 116.

England at the time saved the day, but only just: there were four votes for and only six against the petition.¹⁵⁵

Brahmo Samaj and the Special Marriage Act

The secularization of marriage proceeded apace with the other social reforms. The Special Marriage Act of 1872 was passed essentially at the behest of the *Brahmo Samaj* whose adherents did not want to undergo a Hindu religious marriage ceremony.¹⁵⁶ By declaring non-allegiance to any of the seven faiths, members could opt for a civil marriage if religion or custom placed any obstacle in their way. The orthodox community naturally feared the liberalization of a social climate birthing breakaway groups who would otherwise be hard put to find a way of getting married unless they fully met their religious obligations. But times, they were a-changing!

Vidyasagar and Widow Remarriage

We have already met Vidyasagar and his drive to make widow remarriage acceptable to the Hindu masses. His greatest argument was that he was not trying to introduce a measure which had no religious approval,¹⁵⁷ a claim his opponents, like Radhakanta Deb, contested. Deb argued, as he had against Roy's *sati* reform, that for reforms to be successful, the "soil must be prepared first."¹⁵⁸ That was why he was opposed to widow marriage but supported female education.¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁵ Ibid.

¹⁵⁶ Saiyid, *Muslim Women of the British Punjab*, 22.

¹⁵⁷ Panikkar, *Culture, Ideology, Hegemony*, 91.

¹⁵⁸ Panikkar, *Colonialism, Culture, Resistance*, 63.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.

The authority of the *Shastras*, as has been stated before, was accepted by all parties; they only differed in their interpretations.¹⁶⁰

One of the most outstanding humanists of his times, Vidyasagar's ideas were ultimately defeated by the very society he had devoted his life trying to reform until he became that sad, tragic figure to whom one of his friends brought his daughter to be blessed. The revered pundit, while blessing the young girl, wished that she should get married soon and then become a widow so that he could perform yet another widow marriage.¹⁶¹

Age Of Consent Bill

The modernists also attacked child marriage. Ranade, a chitpavin Brahman, formed the National Social Conference in 1887 which concerned itself with the plight of Hindu widows and denial of property to women.¹⁶² In August 1884, the journalist Behramji Malabari published notes on infant marriage, which despite their eloquence were unable to convince the British government, prompting him to shift his campaign to England where he won the support of British feminists.¹⁶³ Because of his relentless leveraging, the British government in India eventually gave in and amended the Indian Penal Code increasing the minimum age of consent for sexual intercourse from 10 to 12.¹⁶⁴

¹⁶⁰ Panikkar, *Culture, Ideology, Hegemony*, 91.

¹⁶¹ Panikkar, *Colonialism, Culture, Resistance*, 142.

¹⁶² Saiyid, *Muslim Women of the British Punjab*, 23.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*, 23.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

The initiative for the Age of Consent Bill came from the Hindu community because it was seen primarily as a Hindu problem.¹⁶⁵ The prominent Punjabi politician Mian Muhammad Shah Nawaz weighed in for the Muslims who wanted to articulate a voice against child marriage. He said that a cursory study of marriage laws in Muslim countries such as Turkey and Egypt demonstrates that the Bill did not interfere with Muslim religious law. In Egypt as far back as 1864 royal decree had set the ages of marriage of a boy at 18 and a girl at 15.¹⁶⁶ He maintained that to many Hindu theologians, the *Smritis* were only recommendatory not mandatory. It is interesting that a Muslim member of the legislature could voice his opinion on a theological aspect of Hindu Law.¹⁶⁷ Muhammad Ali Jinnah, also weighing in on the matter, reasoned based on Quranic principle: “Sir I am convinced in my mind that there is nothing in the Quran, there is nothing in Islam which prevents us from destroying this evil.”¹⁶⁸

It must be remembered that it was in toto, British government support, such as that for the watershed Child Marriage Act, and the work of the reformers, which made the liberal legislation regarding women possible. Jinnah welcomed the change in the government’s old policy of supporting traditional social practices. Jinnah, before the Bill had passed, aware that it might not be particularly popular with his constituents, went so far as to declare that if the electorate of his constituency did not approve of his support for the Bill, they should elect someone else in his place.¹⁶⁹ The opponents of the Bill finally learnt that the government was no longer going to remain neutral.¹⁷⁰

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 26.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 27.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 28.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 40.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 39.

Mohammed Shafi, Jinnah and the Sharia Act

There was an inherent conflict between Islamic *sharia* and the Rivaj-i-Am or 'customary law' of the rural areas. Rural folk were threatened by *sharia* because it was a threat to their way of life. They were hostile to daughters inheriting land, arguing that a handsome dowry was enough.¹⁷¹ However, Muhammad Shafi, an eminent lawyer from Lahore, voiced that Muslim women were adversely affected by the abandonment of the religious personal law in favor of customary law. *Sharia* was more magnanimous towards women than customary law, which was Hindu in its content and origin.¹⁷² It was from this position of disadvantage that the women of India struggled to emerge. A Bill moved for replacing customary law with *sharia* ultimately led to the passing of the Sharia Act of 1937, piloted by Muhammad Ali Jinnah.

It would be erroneous, however, to see this change due to women's liberation movement. The issue of Muslim women's emancipation had come to be closely intertwined with the rising consciousness of Islamic identity among the Muslims. Any criticism of the backwardness of Muslim women was answered by the response that this was a result of Muslims straying from the straight path of Islam, which had given Muslim women a status equal to that of men, a status which the Sharia Bill intended to restore. Hindu customs were blamed for reducing women to the status of chattels.¹⁷³ The Muslim Dissolution of Marriage Bill followed soon on the heels of the Sharia Bill in 1939, according to which, in the future, apostasy would not automatically lead to the dissolution of marriage.¹⁷⁴

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 15.

¹⁷² *Ibid.*, 18.

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*, 35.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

Gandhi and Women's Politics

Mohandas Gandhi was the first to bring women out for the national struggle in droves, marking a crucial break from a tradition of seclusion. He saw women as agents of change, not as objects of reform, which is different from how the early reformers perceived them.¹⁷⁵ As he put it once, "I would have no use for that *swaraj* to which women have not made their full contribution."¹⁷⁶ It is easy to forget the phenomenal success Gandhi achieved in this area. It can be judged by the fact that today hardly anyone will oppose women's fundamental rights or deny them participation in politics.¹⁷⁷

Gandhi, conversely, still stressed traditional roles of 'mother' and 'wife' for women and in this way fell short of addressing the origins and nature of the exploitation of the women of India.¹⁷⁸ He warned that the "women who seek to ride the horse that men rode succeeded only in bringing down both."¹⁷⁹ Today, many organizations which claim to follow the Gandhian path reinforce that traditional position of women and tend to give off vibes closer to that of the narrow Bharataiya Janata Party's ideology on women where they are organized and mobilized to defend and perpetuate traditional institutions with patriarchal authoritarian structures and value systems.¹⁸⁰

The All-India Women's Conference

¹⁷⁵ Shah, *Social Movements in India*, 149.

¹⁷⁶ Som, *Gandhi, Bose, Nehru*, 112.

¹⁷⁷ Shah, *Social Movements in India*, 149.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 149.

¹⁷⁹ Som, *Gandhi, Bose Nehru*, 17.

¹⁸⁰ Shah, *Social Movements in India*, 149.

The role of the All-India Women's Conference (AWIC) in the struggle for the liberation of women may have been negative. In fact, through its programs, the AIWC strengthened the traditional role of women as 'wife' and 'housekeeper.' She is asked to perform some of the functions outside the four walls to assist her husband rather than to raise her head and develop dignity as a human being. Such women's organizations have become instruments in spreading an ideology which assigns inferior roles to women. They strengthen revivalist values which are oppressive to women. The Indian women's movement could, by a stretch of the imagination, be even seen as an attempt by a previously excluded segment, that is high status women, to enter the political playing field. These women do not challenge the hierarchical framework and justify their demands on the grounds of restoring previously held rights.

Women during the Freedom Struggle

Jinnah made a very deliberate effort to involve Muslim women in the movement for Pakistan. However, it was the women members of the Indian National Congress, most of who were Christians or Hindus, who were the forerunners of women's participation in politics. The chief catalyst in bringing Muslim women into politics was the Khilafat Movement.¹⁸¹ When the Ali brothers were arrested, their mother addressed the All-India Muslim League session of 1917 from behind purdah and exhorted the people to carry on the mission of her sons, an unprecedented step for no Muslim woman before had addressed such large gatherings attended by both men and women.¹⁸² But only a few individual women such as Jahanara Shahnawaz came

¹⁸¹ Saiyid, *Muslim Women of the British Punjab*, 87.

¹⁸² *Ibid.*, 87.

to prominence in Indian politics as part of the movement for emancipation and voting rights. The majority of women remained unaffected.

Participation in street demonstrations and agitations and the experience of being arrested and taken to jail had torn asunder the barriers of seclusion behind which women had been confined for centuries. The hero of the day was the girl who climbed the Punjab Secretariat building and hoisted the Pakistan flag, not the woman who stayed home, a passive spectator of the events shaping the future of the country.¹⁸³

Homo Hierarchicus

The second local institution we shall look at which underwent severe criticism, if not radical change, was the institution of caste. Caste had utterly debilitated the lower strata of eighteenth-century Indian society before the advent of modernity. The non-Brahmans had been the creators of a historic southern Tamil culture. They were opposed to the privileged position of the northern Sanskrit culture of the Brahmans, a position strengthened in modern education and government service with the coming of the British. Although the spread of liberal education and urbanization helped a few backward castes rise above the grind of abject poverty, the situation for the millions of teeming others remained hopeless. This moved them to oppose the nationalist movement commandeered by powerful Brahmans and give their allegiance instead to the British.

The movement against caste distinctions was the earliest expression of democratization in Indian society.¹⁸⁴ Once, in reply to Gandhi's observation that all leaves of the same tree are not identical

¹⁸³ *Ibid.*, 101.

¹⁸⁴ Panikkar, *Colonialism, Culture, Resistance*, 99.

in shape, Narayana Guru pointed out that the difference was only superficial but not in essence: the juice of all leaves of a particular tree will be the same in content.¹⁸⁵ However, even for the scheduled castes, which preferred ‘Dalit,’ meaning oppressed, to Gandhi’s pejorative ‘harijan’ or ‘Children of God,’¹⁸⁶ the pull of tradition remained intense. Many movements begun as anti-caste transformed into caste solidarity movements over time. The *Kayastha Sabha*, *Sarin Sabha* and *Dravida Kazhagam* are examples.¹⁸⁷ The *Arya Samaj* was the most strongly opposed to caste but ended up legitimizing hierarchy for its members through a reformed Varna-system based on merit.¹⁸⁸

Early Resistance to Caste

Idolatry and caste distinctions were challenged by a number of heterodox sects in early India, whose numerical strength was not insignificant: most of them had a following between twenty and thirty thousand. Hence, they cannot be dismissed as personal revolts without any social significance. The heterodox *Satnami* and *Shivnarayan* were strongly opposed to all caste distinctions.¹⁸⁹ The *Karthabajas* ate together and addressed each other as equals. Charan Das, a major Hindu religious teacher in eighteenth-century Delhi, invoked an eclectic reading of holy scriptures to crush caste.¹⁹⁰ The followers of Dadu, Raidas and Nanak had casteless societies.¹⁹¹

¹⁸⁵ Ibid., 49,

¹⁸⁶ Shah, *Social Movements in India*, 120.

¹⁸⁷ Panikkar, *Colonialism, Culture, Resistance*, 49.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid., 140.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid., 99.

¹⁹⁰ Panikkar, *Culture, Ideology, Hegemony*, 5.

¹⁹¹ Panikkar, *Colonialism, Culture, Resistance*, 99.

These are expressions of ‘modernist’ reform, against tyranny of hierarchy, born independently of foreign rule.¹⁹²

Dayanand Saraswati, founder of the *Arya Samaj*, linked caste to competence. Any Brahman found lacking in the performance of the affairs of his office was at once demoted to *Sudra* and vice versa.¹⁹³ The Bhakti movement, a spiritual devotional trend that emerged in old-fashioned Hinduism, contributed to the cultural empowerment of the non-elite sections of society by vernacularization which was not just a shift in the mode of communication, but also representative of social assertion. Precocious Bhaktas questioned the social relevance of a system of hierarchy and sought to undermine it in practice. “Let no one ask a man’s caste” was a slogan they lived by.¹⁹⁴ Jotirao Phule, ideologue of the non-Brahman movement in Maharashtra, founded the *Satyashodhak Samaj* in 1873 and Ramaswami Naikar founded the Dravidian movement to fight Aryan domination which to him was synonymous with abominable Brahmanism.¹⁹⁵ The Adi-Dharma movement which sought to put the untouchable ‘nation’, who claimed to have been in India even before the Hindus arrived, at par with the other ‘great’ nations in India, took off in the Punjab in the 1920s and in fifteen years proved that they too were capable of mass mobilization for their own benefit.¹⁹⁶

Ambedkar and Dalit Deliverance

¹⁹² Panikkar, *Culture, Ideology, Hegemony*, 5.

¹⁹³ Shah, *Social Movements in India*, 120.

¹⁹⁴ Panikkar, *Colonialism, Culture, Resistance*, 99.

¹⁹⁵ Shah, *Social Movements in India*, 142.

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 121.

Bhim Rao Ambedkar launched the major anti-untouchability movement in the 1920s in Maharashtra that soon acquired a national character. His political praxis was always modern, non-traditional, and non-confrontational, not explosive or reactionary. He formed the peaceable Scheduled Castes Federation in 1954 and organized the Independent Labor Party on secular lines, open to laborers belonging to all castes.¹⁹⁷ The latter, although, did not make much of an impact. Demand for separate electorates for Dalits led to a bitter conflict between Ambedkar and Gandhi who did not think the problem of untouchability was politically expedient. The Poona Pact signed between the two left the scheduled castes with a bitter taste in the mouth. Ambedkar concluded that the only way of improving the status of the untouchables was to renounce the Hindu religion. “You have nothing to lose except your religion,” he said.¹⁹⁸ Buddhism was deemed an appropriate alternative because it was an indigenous Indian religion of equality, anti-caste and anti-Brahman in character. Ambedkar and a number of his followers converted to Buddhism in 1956.¹⁹⁹ The conversion did not really make any significant change in the social and occupational life of the new converts but has spread Dalit consciousness much wider.²⁰⁰

Today, Ambedkar is deified by poor rural Dalits who scrap together whatever they have to install statues in his likeness. They are usually life-size and always as he lived: in western garb, one arm upraised teaching, the other cradling the Constitution. “This is what the image represents: education, success, contribution to the political world of India, courage, and empowerment through relationship to government, ‘one of us’, who was not only important personally, but was

¹⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 124.

¹⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

important to India.”²⁰¹ His role as Chairman of the Drafting Committee of the Indian Constitution has assumed great importance and symbolic value in Dalit communities.

Because of their numerical strength, and the efforts of Ambedkar, Dalits, in what has been called ‘India’s silent revolution,’²⁰² succeeded in shoring their position in the state assembly. True to Ambedkar’s methods, the backward castes rarely resorted to large-scale direct action for asserting their demands and generally did not confront the higher castes. They submitted their demands for higher social status by submitting memoranda and petitions and taking part in election campaigns on a massive scale. Their mobilization rarely ever led to a ‘struggle’ the way it did for the Muslims, for example.²⁰³

Public Education

We finally arrive at the last most important area that the burgeoning social modernity impacted deeply.

Medieval Education

Although Indian education, before the colonial experience, had always been of a more ‘spiritual’ nature, with little attention going into the development of science,²⁰⁴ local schools, which had

²⁰¹ Ibid., 126.

²⁰² Ibid., 141.

²⁰³ Ibid., 141.

²⁰⁴ Ghosh, *History of Education*, 6.

survived centuries of political vicissitude, in fact decayed under the British Raj.²⁰⁵ The missionary William Adam concluded that there still was one school for every 32 boys.²⁰⁶ These are not mythical figures. Almost every village had a school where elementary basics were taught,²⁰⁷ where Brahmans instructed younglings for arduously long hours in *Tols* and *Chatuspathis* for free. A magnanimous aristocracy patronized them, and the Maulvis, who would also teach Hindu boys at the *maktabs*. Girls, because of social prejudice, were taught at home.²⁰⁸ Delhites before British ascendancy had had a favourable liking toward European knowledge. Newton's *Principia* was rendered into Arabic during Asif ud-Dawla's reign, Saadat Ali Khan founded an observatory and Ghaziuddin Hyder set up a laboratory in Lucknow. But it was not long before a rejection of western science and English language set in.

Education under the Colonials

Under British dominion, notable Muhammadan and Hindu families, despite lavish government scholarships, refused to send their children to the schools.²⁰⁹ "A candid Muhammadan would probably admit," said the Hunter Report later, "that the most powerful factors (against acquiring an English education) are to be found in pride of race, in memory of bygone superiority, religious fears, and a not unnatural attachment to the learning of Islam."²¹⁰

Indians, however, soon realized that the acceptance of western education was a matter of survival. Moreover, although a strong desire for western education gripped the intellectuals, it

²⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 9.

²⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 8.

²⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 7.

²⁰⁹ Saiyid, *Muslim Women of the British Punjab*, 24.

²¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 46.

was not a willing acceptance of Western superiority, as is fondly believed, but a drive to get at and assimilate only the source elements of European power.²¹¹

The early colonialists patronized and learnt from the native school system. Warren Hastings, Governor General of Bengal, founded the Calcutta Madrasah on his own accord, and endowed it with the rent of a few villages near the city.²¹² Chaplain A. Bell introduced the Madras monitorial system to schools for the poor in England.²¹³ However, these were only individual efforts. Like the inclusion of oriental learning in the courses at Fort William College, an administrative expediency, they were not reflective of Company policy in India.²¹⁴ Within official circles, the issue at hand was not how best to educate Indians but how best could an education policy serve the colonial ideology. To that end, a kind of policy was created that projected British institutions and values as the ideal.²¹⁵

Responses to Western Education

Our reformers' ideas on education differed from what the colonial rulers tried to shovel. Education in their imagining was oriented to the regeneration of the country through the medium of vernacular languages. Traditional education was beginning to be seen as inadequate. Rammohan Roy objected to "loading the mind of the youth with grammatical niceties";²¹⁶ Vidyasagar ridiculed the scientific wholesomeness of the *Shastras*; Ahmed Khan called

²¹¹ Panikkar, *Asia and Western Dominance*, 283.

²¹² Ghosh, *History of Education*, 10.

²¹³ *Ibid.*, 9.

²¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 11.

²¹⁵ Panikkar, *Culture, Ideology, Hegemony*, 9.

²¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 10.

traditional Muslim education a great “stumbling block in the way of progress.”²¹⁷ They proposed a liberal and enlightened alternative embracing mathematics, natural philosophy, chemistry and anatomy.

The lack of knowledge in the mother tongue was a bother. The vast wealth of the British fostered a belief that it was impossible to prosper without the English language. Some, like the radical members of the academic society *Sarbatatya Deepika Sabha* vowed only to speak in their mother tongue, Bengali.²¹⁸ Beginning with *Young Bengal* up to the *Dawn Society*, cultivating vernaculars was important to national regeneration and was a response to the cultural and intellectual consequences of colonial education.²¹⁹ Of vernacularization, Ahmed Khan shared a desire to “have [it] written in gigantic letters on the Himalayas for the remembrance of future generations. If they (English works) be not translated, India can never be civilized: this is the truth, this is the truth.”²²⁰

Clause 43 of the Act Of 1813

The 43rd Clause of the Act of 1813 left one lakh rupees at the Governor General’s disposal to improve the situation of education in British territories,²²¹ misspent on account of the Nepalese War.²²² This, for the first time, made dissemination of education one of the tasks of the Raj, at a time when education was not a state responsibility even in England.²²³ Critics argue it was

²¹⁷ Ibid., 10.

²¹⁸ Ibid., 82.

²¹⁹ Ibid., 81.

²²⁰ Ibid., 15.

²²¹ Ghosh, *History of Education*, 18.

²²² Khan, *Indian Muslim Perceptions*, 4.

²²³ Ghosh, *History of Education*, 19.

created “as a reliable counterpoise, a protecting breakwater against the threatened deluge of missionary enterprise.”²²⁴ But the General Committee of Public Instruction, established in 1823 and wary of hurting native sentiment, took caution to ridiculous extremes, even when the Indians themselves, such as Ramouhan Roy, wanted the policy to be otherwise.²²⁵

The Missionary Perspective

Company officials, after the calm that greeted Bentinck’s abolition of *sati* in 1829, began to grow bolder in support of missionary causes.²²⁶ Parents were still apprehensive of the ‘corrupting influence’ an Anglicized education would have on their children, and this dread hampered the few Indian reformers who desperately wanted to impart the new form of education.

David Hare, a sympathetic Scottish missionary blazed the way when he founded the Hindu School. It was based on principles of strict secularism and religious neutrality.²²⁷ But it was not long before Indians, supported by government aid, began opening schools for their children and by 1882 had outdistanced all missionary enterprise in the field.²²⁸ (HEMI 88). Ramouhan Roy set one up at Suripara, Rasik Krishna Malik started the Hindu Free School, and Kalinath and Baikunthanath Ray Chaudhri started one and left Duff in charge of its affairs.²²⁹ There was growing opposition to a certain Bible Minute which had been passed. Not only orthodox Hindus,

²²⁴ *Ibid.*, 18.

²²⁵ *Ibid.*, 23.

²²⁶ *Ibid.*, 61.

²²⁷ *Ibid.*, 62.

²²⁸ *Ibid.*, 88.

²²⁹ *Ibid.*, 63.

such as Radhakanta and Asutosh Deb, but also liberals like Devendranath Tagore, participated, demanding that education be imparted without interference in religious beliefs.²³⁰

Bentham's Influence on Education

Jeremy Bentham, a new force in early nineteenth century Britain, questioned the government's cautious approach in spreading a western, liberal education in India. James Mill, Bentham's right hand man, writing in *History of British India*, mocked the orientalist Warren Hastings, William Jones, and Charles Wilkins in their admiration of Indian society.²³¹ Nothing appeared to Mill worth preserving.²³² William Bentinck, an admirer of Mill's, once at a farewell dinner on the eve of his departure for India as Governor-General, turned to him and said, "I am going to British India but I shall not be Governor-General. It is you that will be Governor-General."²³³ The cautious approach was thrown to the wind. This was December, 1829.

The Macaulay Minute and Bentinck

The most familiar name of anyone who contributed most to the westernizing influence of education in India has got to be that of Thomas Babington Macaulay. However, it is often missed out that even before Macaulay came to India in 1834 and settled the Anglo-Oriental Controversy for good, Charles Grant had attempted the same a good four decades prior.²³⁴ Grant was an

²³⁰ Panikkar, *Culture, Ideology, Hegemony*, 84.

²³¹ Ghosh, *History of Education*, 27.

²³² *Ibid.*, 28.

²³³ *Ibid.*, 29.

²³⁴ *Ibid.*, 12.

evangelist and was appalled at the Company's tolerance of the monstrous creed of the Hindus. His observations were reflections of two forces at home, the unplanned Industrial Revolution, and the purposeful Evangelical Movement.²³⁵ He was ultimately checkmated by wary tradesmen, who dominated in the Company, thus stifling the cause of Western education in India until Macaulay arrived forty years later.²³⁶

Thomas Macaulay, in characteristic rhetoric, argued for a learned native of India who was well versed in the philosophy of Locke and the poetry of Milton. "Could we found a sanatorium on a spot which we supposed to be healthy?" he asks passionately. He ridiculed the thought of translating works of science into inexact and flowery Eastern languages and brushed aside the claims of Arabic and Sanskrit as media of instruction by his famous flourish, "a single shelf of a good European library was worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia."²³⁷ It was clear to him: the Indian craved an English education. The Hindu College was full; the Sanskrit College empty. English books sold in their thousands; oriental learning had no takers.

Macaulay moved his network, which included Bentinck's favorite, the staunch Anglicist Charles Trevelyan, also Macaulay's brother-in-law, to get his Minute approved.²³⁸ His Machiavellian stroke, a threat to resign if his suggestions were not approved,²³⁹ meant really for his opponents in the other camp but which succeeded in moving Bentinck, who had not even read the Minute Macaulay wrote to concur.²⁴⁰ This decision ended up costing Bentinck the displeasure of the Court of Directors to such an extent that he became a political hermit thereafter.²⁴¹ During the

²³⁵ *Ibid.*, 14.

²³⁶ *Ibid.*, 16.

²³⁷ *Ibid.*, 31.

²³⁸ *Ibid.*, 37.

²³⁹ *Ibid.*, 33.

²⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 35.

²⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 37.

freedom struggle, the summary rejection of Indian history, culture and civilization in this very Minute of 2 February, 1835 was used by the nationalist leaders to whip up anti-Raj feelings among the Indians.²⁴²

The Dalhousie Years

Dalhousie supported J. E. D. Bethune when he opened a school for girls in Calcutta. This was significant because official support for female education in India was unknown before him.²⁴³ No education dispatch prior to his time made even the remotest reference to female education. It was fear of rebellion that made it so. An Eastern woman was chaste and domestic. A literate girl was a widow, the Hindus taught, a prejudice which the Muslims also shared. Dalhousie closed the era of official non-interference in female education.²⁴⁴

Education Dispatch of 1854

The Dispatch of 1854, Magna Carta of Indian education, developed many of Dalhousie's ideas. It also envisioned the institution of university professorships, mass education, and secularization of education in a plural society like India's. These concepts remain valid even today. The Dispatch's performance at the time, in fact, was sketchy. But critics ought to remember that nowhere did it refer to the idea of universal literacy. "The authors did not aim at education for leadership, education for industrial regeneration of India, education for the defense of the

²⁴² *Ibid.*, 38.

²⁴³ *Ibid.*, 68.

²⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 70.

motherland, in short, education required by the people of a self-government nation.²⁴⁵
 “Regardless, what went before the Dispatch led up to it, what followed flowed from it.”²⁴⁶

Mutiny of 1857 and the Founding of Deoband

It was feared that provisions of the Education Dispatch of 1854, like female education and financial help to mission schools, contributed to the catastrophe of 1857. The outcome of the Mutiny was a great shock to the Muslims of North India. It had been a desperate attempt to restore the political umbrella of a society safe from undesirable external stimuli.²⁴⁷ Qasim Nanotavi and Rashid Ahmad Gangohi, groomed in the Walliullah tradition, represented that disgruntled spirit. However, the failed Mutiny had made it clear that circumstances warranted pacific measures. Hence, the peacefully anti-British Dar ul-Uloom was founded at Chatta Mosque, Deoband, just eight years after the revolt; a modest first lesson was taught to a singular student, the future Sheikh ul-Hind Mahmud Hasan, who would later claim the institution “was established as an epicenter from where people could be prepared to make up for the losses of 1857.”²⁴⁸ Gangohi, soon clamped down on the study of the works of Ibn Rushd and Farabi, in logic and philosophy, which ultimately curtailed *ijtihad*.

Aligarh College

²⁴⁵ Ibid., 81.

²⁴⁶ Ibid., 82.

²⁴⁷ Masroor Hashmi, *Muslim Response to Western Education: A Study of Four Pioneer Institutions* (New Delhi: Commonwealth, 1989), 27.

²⁴⁸ Ibid., 38.

Syed Ahmed Khan took an entirely different lesson from the Mutiny. Khan was convinced of the permanence of British rule, as well as the dangers of getting on their darker side. He founded Madrasa tul-Uloom, later known as Aligarh College. It was carefully inaugurated as a school on the birthday of Queen Victoria.²⁴⁹ Unabashedly modern, secular, and pro-British from its very inception and through the tumultuous Khilafat years, it tried to make an English education, and friendly terms with the British, palatable to the Muslims.

Khan undertook a visit to England which proved to be tremendously educational. The monetary involvement of the British people in the education of their children moved him, which influenced the founder's policy of donor's pledges.²⁵⁰ A number of British people, including W. W. Hunter, author of *Indian Musalmans*, contributed sums for the fledgling institution.²⁵¹ The University of Cambridge served as a model for Aligarh College.²⁵²

Western education had a wondrous ability to shear off superstitious fluff. Khan's criticism of the antiquated Dars-i-Nizami,²⁵³ and his enthusiastic support for the British, earned him the ire of leading religious clerics. His conviction that no country progressed by its citizens ignoring the dominant language, that is the language of the ruling race, English in the case of the Indians,²⁵⁴ echoed Macaulay's own thoughts on a progressive western education, which cultivated exactness of thought that rescinded the looseness of expression of Indian languages. However, the failure of the study of natural science and mathematics cannot be attributed to language alone. The decadent mid-nineteenth-century society of northern India had changed the powerful current of

²⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 87.

²⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 105.

²⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 106.

²⁵² *Ibid.*, 85.

²⁵³ *Ibid.*, 96.

²⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 84.

Urdu language into channels of poetic exaggeration thereby rendering it incapable of becoming a scientific language.²⁵⁵

Aligarh, however, never became a first class teaching college. The tenure of the English principals developed traditions of a kind that might be called ‘Cambridge-like in content and feudal in nature.’²⁵⁶ The president of the debating club, Beck did not want British rule in India to be harangued from the small student platform and threatened to veto if ever debate drifted thence, a policy which had the earnest backing of Khan, who always shunned politics of confrontation.²⁵⁷ When Aligarh finally did plunge into the politics of the freedom movement, it was, in the words of Jawaharlal Nehru, “neither to be anti-Hindu, nor to be communally separatist.”²⁵⁸

Nadwa Tul-Ulema

The apolitical, reformist, urban Nadwa tul-Ulema, brainchild of Mohammed Ali Monghyri, and halfway intellectually between Aligarh and Deoband, although closer to the former, was established in the last decade of the nineteenth-century at Lucknow, and aimed to produce the modern, West-wise *alim*.²⁵⁹ Shibli Nomani who taught there was a modernist, influenced by the enlightened Professor Arnold,²⁶⁰ and drafted a literature intensive syllabus that favored the teaching of Hindi and Sanskrit to parry criticism of *Arya Samajists*.²⁶¹

²⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 94.

²⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 101.

²⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 102.

²⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 107.

²⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 32.

²⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 140.

²⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 135.

The Dangers of a Western Education

By the end of the 1870s, the number of discontented subjects using methods of organization, acquired through a western university education, was posing a challenge to British rule. Lord Ripon observed, “It is little short of folly that we should throw open to increasing numbers the rich stores of western learning; that we should inspire them with European ideas and bring them into the closest contact with English thought, and that then we should, as it were, pay no heed to the growth of those aspirations which we have ourselves created, and the pride of those ambitions we have ourselves called forth.”²⁶² University courses, with their disproportionate attention to literature, law and philosophy, limited the choice of a career to either government service or analogous employment.²⁶³

Many turned to the professions. At the beginning of the 1880s, there was hardly any important town in India without its sprinkling of teachers, lawyers, journalists and doctors, who took very lively interest in the social and political issues of the day.²⁶⁴

The growing unemployment fueled militant nationalist sentiments, expressed by the newly minted BAs and MAs in English dailies and at association meetings. David Hume rode the wave of discontent when in 1885 he organized the Indian National Congress. Hardly any annual session took place without a discussion on the subject of employment.²⁶⁵ This could not quell the violence.

²⁶² Ghosh, *History of Education*, 99.

²⁶³ *Ibid.*, 103.

²⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 104.

²⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 105.

The feeling of backing the decision to promote English education since the days of Macaulay had been miscalculation spread. They had bet on the wrong horse. The Indians were simply unsuited to it. Lord Curzon remarked that: “When Erasmus was reproached with having laid the egg from which came forth the Reformation, ‘Yes’, Erasmus had replied, ‘but I laid a hen’s egg and Luther hatched a fighting cock’”.²⁶⁶ Lord Curzon himself fully subscribed to the view of checking the spread of higher education and supported Annie Besant’s scheme of a Hindu College in Banaras which proposed to divert young men’s attention away from western education.²⁶⁷

Partition of Bengal and National Education

When the intellectuals had found out that Lord Curzon intended to exclude the Indians from control of the universities,²⁶⁸ they tried to try to create a parallel National Education system. It was also catalyzed by the agitation against the 1905 partition of Bengal, and resultant *swadeshi* movement.²⁶⁹ When the partition was annulled, National Education lingered a little before dying. G. K. Gokhale was influenced by the English example of compulsory primary education, and in 1906, moved a resolution in the Imperial Legislative Council for free and compulsory elementary education throughout India. However, despite his eloquent pleading, the Bill was rejected. “We of the present generation in India,” he observed, “can only hope to serve our country by our failures.”²⁷⁰ The partition of Bengal created awareness for the need of an Indian education system, during which children were withdrawn from government schools and put into Azad

²⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 107.

²⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 135.

²⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 134.

²⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 139.

schools, which used modern Indian languages and replaced ‘God Save the King’ with ‘Vande Mataram.’²⁷¹

Jamia Milia Islamia

Jamia Millia Islamia, founded alongside the Hindu Kashi Vidya Pith at Benaras,²⁷² came into existence in the last decade of the twentieth century when the Khilafat movement merged with the non-cooperation movement to form a powerful front against the British. Hindu and Muslim unity was at an all-time high, but the Jamia managed to preserve its Islamic name and character,²⁷³ on the insistence of Gandhi.²⁷⁴ Graduates were not to aspire to government jobs. Mahmud Hasan, speaking at the inauguration ceremony quoting Gandhi, said, “higher learning in [government] colleges is like clean and clear milk in which is mixed a little amount of poison.”²⁷⁵

How an English Education May Have Saved India

Without an English education, the Indian community would have split into as many different units as there are languages in India and would have repeated the pattern of a politically and ethnically fragmented Europe, a conglomeration of mutually hostile units within the same

²⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 140.

²⁷² Hashmi, *Muslim Response*, 148.

²⁷³ *Ibid.*, 33.

²⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 155.

²⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 186.

Christian community.²⁷⁶ India was therefore saved by the common medium of education. In Western Europe the emphasis on regional languages and the absence of a cementing factor in secular life, the development was through fragmentation. Except for a hundred years of uniform education through the English language, the result may have been the same in India.²⁷⁷

²⁷⁶ Panikkar, *Asia and Western Dominance*, 248.

²⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 248.

Chapter II: Politics

Introduction

Despite Francis Fukuyama's overestimation of the "universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government," the viewpoint has deeply influenced and shaped the world, including India, and is the dominant political outlook today. This chapter is an attempt to explicate the social origins of liberal political modernity in India. In brief, Indian democracy is a strange creature: although the democracy that has survived here is no mere sham, with a free judiciary, regular elections, and civilian control of the military, it exists without the experience of a homegrown industrial revolution, as it does elsewhere in the world.

Ancient India

Democracy as a distinct political institution did not exist in ancient India as in the classical age of ancient Greece. Yet, there were social inklings, such as tolerance, respect, open debate, nonviolence, and a plethora others, which set the tenor of Indian soil for the seed of democracy thousands of years later.

Public Reasoning

The connection between democracy and public reasoning has often been missed. The democratic spirit thrives in nonviolent public discussion and interactive reasoning and is nurtured wherever such tradition exists, in or outside of the West. Ancient India has had a rich tradition of public reasoning. Toleration and religious heterodoxy have been a proud part of Indian life for centuries.

The spread of public reasoning is linked to Buddhist activity in ancient India.¹ A succession of Buddhist councils, held at Rajagriha, Kashmir and Patliputra (now Patna), attempted to resolve religious differences which tangentially helped consolidate the tradition of open discussion.² The first Buddhist monarch, Asoka, codified public discussion to keep it within the confines of civility³ and may have even unwittingly helped Buddhism take root in faraway Japan.⁴ A seventh-century constitution, the *kempo*, was inspired by Buddhist teachings and has been called Japan's "first step of gradual development towards democracy."⁵

We must take cognizance of such ideational leanings of India's past if we are to resist the temptation of attributing India's democratic experience solely to British experience. That is not to say, of course, that without colonial intervention India would have developed democratic institutions all on her own; to proffer such an account is fantastical. But the fact that in over a hundred countries that were colonized by the British, it was India that chose to take the democratic road should account for something. To the extent that traditions of public reasoning can be drawn on, democracy becomes easier to institute and preserve.⁶

¹ Sen, *The Argumentative Indian*, 15.

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*, 16.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 82.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Sen, *The Argumentative Indian*, 13.

Medieval India

Despite all that, medieval India, especially during the Mughal era, had essentially become a hotbed for undemocratic practices, some adumbrated below.

Oriental Despotism

Mughal rule in India was through royal absolutism which was exceedingly unfavourable to the growth of political democracy. A system such as this prevented aristocratic or peasant threats to royal rule through an exploitative system of tax farming. Extremely exploitative, this eventually led to the breakdown of the whole system, allowing European traders to gain an accretionary toehold on the subcontinent.⁷

Mughal bureaucracy was agrarian, and was ruled by a monarchical class, supported by an army, and reliant on a mass of peasants who paid for both. Surprisingly hardy and long-lasting, it survived in India even until after the Nehru period.⁸ What made this superstructure unique was the absence of a landed aristocracy whose source of power was independent of royalty. All land was the 'property' of the ruler and a noble was either a servant or an opponent of the crown.⁹ Each noble was responsible for the affairs of, and a fixed tribute from, the land he was assigned to. He was continually rotated throughout his career and upon his death, neither wealth nor land were passed on to his sons, but returned to the royal treasury. Smothering primogeniture among the nobles this way ensured no territorial power could be propped against the king.

⁷ Barrington Moore, Jr., *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy: Lord and Peasant in the Making of the Modern World* (London: Penguin Books Ltd., 1981), 315.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 318.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 328.

Even then, the emperor only succeeded in scripting his own doom. If he let the assignees cultivate their allotted land, they could develop a base of power to challenge the center. If he transferred them frequently, they would be tempted to extricate as much wealth from the peasants as time allowed, before moving on to the next assignment.¹⁰ There was evidence of instability because of these frequent changes even as early as the time of Jahangir.¹¹

Mughal bureaucracy, unlike in Manchu China, was primitive. Promotion was not ruled by tests of fitness or competence but by the emperor's intuitive judgement of character. Offices weren't cleanly separated either. Men of great literary merit would often meet their death in command of troops at the frontier.¹² Pompous display and squandering were features of the time, and the emperor set the example at court replicated in the regions. This splendour, and an absurd profusion of retainers, struck European observers. Every elephant had four attendants¹³, and one of the later emperors had human attendants assigned to each of the dogs brought to him as presents from England!¹⁴ The construction of the Taj Mahal by Shah Jahan, and the Peacock Throne, which took seven years to build and whose value has been assessed at more than a million pound sterling, put severe financial strain on the administrative system.¹⁵

Merchant Classes

Another royal prerogative, of claiming the wealth of well-to do traders when they died, helped stifle the creation of a powerful merchant class. The political attitude of the authorities towards

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid., 320.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid., 321.

¹⁵ Ibid., 327.

the merchants was that of the spider towards the fly.¹⁶ In contrast, European monarchs cultivated their merchants and great European cities like Rome, Paris and London developed into important trade and commerce centers, unlike Agra, Lahore and Delhi which, although great cities in their own right, were political and religious centers and not hubs of economic activity.¹⁷

Zamindars

Native intermediaries, called *zamindars*, helped rule and tax the empire, which made it look like a patchwork of local despotisms all allied to the crown. When power at the center began to wane, they became the rallying point for peasant rebellions.¹⁸ Even at the height of Mughal prestige, revolts were a common occurrence and only became more frequent as the system descended into ludicrous levels of exploitation.

The relative abundance of land often induced negligent cultivating practices and peasants would sooner abscond en masse in response to tyranny. Flight was the first answer to famine or oppression.¹⁹ Peasants remained mainly producers of revenue and were tax-farmed dry. The menial labourer was the nethermost a person could sink to, lower than the lowliest peasant, part of a fellowship of outcastes known as the ‘untouchables.’

¹⁶ Ibid., 323.

¹⁷ Ibid., 322.

¹⁸ Ibid., 326.

¹⁹ Ibid., 332.

By the eighteenth-century, India, without the umbrage of a unified empire, was a medley of petty kingdoms at war with one another, in time returned to her most visited state: a bunch of squabbling kingdoms, ready prey for a foreign conqueror.²⁰

Caste

Caste had significant political consequences. Caste operated at the level of the village and took care of all the individual's spiritual, marital and day-to-day needs.²¹ Government was unnecessary and much larger than caste, so it bred an indifference to the political goings on outside the village.²² Politics was something imposed from the outside.²³ The government was seen as predatory.²⁴ This is completely unlike the situation in China where a powerful bureaucracy was a cohesive force in society and needed reform if the situation of the people needed alleviating.

Indigeneous Democracy and Capitalism

Most Marxist scholarly circles fondly harp on the idea that if it were not for colonial intervention, Indian society was about to break through the seams of the native agrarian system and develop in the direction of political and economic modernity. We need put this myth to rest. There is no evidence to support this claim.²⁵ Neither capitalism nor parliamentary democracy could have emerged unaided from seventeenth-century Indian society.²⁶ However, the French

²⁰ Ibid., 329.

²¹ Ibid., 339.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid., 321.

²⁶ Ibid.

traveler Tavernier speaks of germs similar to the Protestant Ethic (and the aforementioned tradition of public reasoning) present in Indian society when he visited.²⁷ These germs were, in the end, not sufficiently strong enough to alter the prevailing system.

Akbar

Akbar's tradition of tolerance was not enough to obviate the path towards tyranny; *but there it was*. During his reign, he had supported passionate and peaceful dialogues between adherents of different faiths. Among the palace complex he built for himself at Fatahpur Sikri, he had a storied house for religious and temporal deliberation built. This was at a time when Copernicus was being condemned in Europe. Unsurprisingly, there are some who argue that Akbar's devotion to tolerance has taken on mythical proportions over time and that he was not particularly charitable to those who questioned his universal sovereignty.²⁸ Regardless, royal patronage is still an important facet for the development of democracy whether it developed in India or not and Akbar's reign is an example of a medieval state allowing a deliberate conception of democratic culture.

Successor States

Many historians have written on the political and economic decadence of the successor states to the Mughal Empire. (Not all were decadent, however. The Kingdom of Mysore under Tipu Sultan and his father Hyder Ali comes to mind.) These historians tend to blame the hegemonic

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Tariq Ali, *The Duel: Pakistan on the Flight Path of American Power* (New York: Scribner, 2008), 18.

decline of the Mughals that birthed these autonomous states. This is merely an instance of political fragmentation, not as they suggest, chaos and disintegration.²⁹ Loss of central authority is not necessarily a misfortune, and the successor states were full of vigor and vitality.³⁰ The administration of Bengal under Khans Murshid Kuli and Alivardi was just as efficient as during the heyday of the Empire.³¹ Travancore under Marthanda Varma became a regional power.³² The picture of anarchy and decadence is therefore quite amiss. India after the Mughals, to reiterate, was not politically decadent, but fragmented. This fragmentation and in-fighting, however, could not provide a bulwark against European encroachment into India.

Pax Britannica

Ascendency of the Company

The coming of the British to India was in the wake of the burst of energy released after the old medieval Christian order had collapsed all over Europe paving the way for secular civilization to emerge.

British influence in India was not uniform over three centuries but influenced by the flux in society from Elizabethan times to the twentieth-century.³³ In the eighteenth-century, the British controlled no more than a fraction of the land of the Indian subcontinent. By the middle of the nineteenth-century, the East India Company was no longer organized for commerce but plunder, and succeeded in establishing a centralized bureaucracy, a system of justice and law and order,

²⁹ Panikkar, *Culture, Ideology, Hegemony*, 36.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

³³ Barrington Moore, Jr., *Social Origins of Democracy and Dictatorship*, 341.

and a vast territory to tax. We must allow ourselves a moment to ponder on this astonishing historical paradox: from this unpromising amalgam of a company of merchants quite indistinguishable from land pirates there emerged a state with valid claims to democracy.³⁴

Indian Observers

While the British colonized India and dug deeper roots, lumpen Indian observers perceived the unfolding political chaos and the foreign political institutions that came to take the old one's place. To Ghulam Husain, political disorder was not the Company's contribution, but its roots could be the decaying administrative structure of the Mughal Empire itself. Company rule only accentuated the affair.³⁵

The Indian observers realized that Britain was dynamic because it was ruled by a well-regulated government. Britain, governed by law, presented a complete contrast to political anarchy and chaos that prevailed in eighteenth-century India.³⁶ I'tisam al-Din's *Shigarf-nama* was the first attempt to comprehend and assimilate western ideas within an indigenous framework.³⁷ When he visited Europe, the lethargy of the Indian aristocracy contrasted sharply against British institutions, bound by constitution and law-abiding citizenry. Abd al-Latif and Mir Husain hypothesized reasons for Europe's eminence. They were the waning of feudalism, the rise of

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Khan, *Indian Muslim Perceptions*, 60.

³⁶ Ibid., 65.

³⁷ Ibid., 78.

national monarchies, the Reformation and the Age of Discovery, although they did not use these terms or exact Persian equivalents.³⁸

The observers were aware that British freedom was derived from laws. The king had the right neither to appoint judges nor to dismiss them. Therefore the judges were free from the compulsion of higher authority and were independent in deciding cases. Abu Talib appreciated the freedom enjoyed by the British people and freedom which was based on a rational philosophy was a source of spiritual contentment and well-being. He explained to his readers that the British had nothing to fear from their superior authorities who had no control whatsoever over people's personal lives.

Karim Khan's work described the main political parties in England. He wrote on the Tories, Whigs, Radicals and Chartists. The Chartists, Karim pointed out, were at the time demanding abolition of the property qualification for members of parliament. All decisions were ultimately settled by the electoral majority. Politics in Britain remained a dilemma for him. The Home Secretary Robert Peel once asked him, "What appears to you as the most unique feature of this country?" He expected Karim to mention the industrial revolution, the railways, steamships, weaving machines or other electric innovations. Instead, Karim said, "For me, the debate between the Tories and the Whigs was the strangest thing. Since, if there existed such dissensions and hostility it would become a cause of ruin of a family; if there arose so much of differences and discord among the pillars of the state, this would ultimately lead to its downfall. But I am bewildered to observe the differences between the Tories and the Whigs. Rather, in Britain, these rivalries promoted the stability of the state and prosperity of its people."³⁹

³⁸ Ibid., 79.

³⁹ Ibid., 310.

Liberalism and Empire

Politics in Britain and her colonies was driven by the dominant creed of the time called liberalism, a term which came into popular usage after 1818.⁴⁰ Liberalism by definition commits itself to the securing of liberty and human dignity, guarantees the rights of freedom of expression, conscience, property, civilian rule, and representative government. Yet these very ideals provided the basis for the justification of an empire over which the sun never set. Progressive giants of their time, Jeremy Bentham, Thomas Macaulay, and James and J. S. Mill, all endorsed an undemocratic and non-representative superstructure to exist over indigenous Indian self-determination.⁴¹ The only ironic exception was Edmund Burke, the leading conservative of his time, who was deeply reluctant in supporting British imperial ambitions in India, Ireland and America.⁴²

The British, liberal and politically progressive in their outlook, were not in India to start a democracy. It is one of the great ironies of history that the exemplar democracy of the world also held down the greatest empire; truly a great dissonance in words and deeds.⁴³

Testing Ground

Eighteenth-century India and liberalism encountered each other as strangers, but soon India became a testing ground for such British political thinking. All leading thinkers, including the

⁴⁰ Uday Mehta, *Liberalism and Empire: India in British Liberal Thought* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999), 11.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 7.

aforementioned, wrote extensively on the ‘jewel in the Empress’ crown.’⁴⁴ “It is remarkable how many of the movements of English life tested their strength upon the Indian question.”⁴⁵ India became a lab of sorts for verifying the validity of the liberal creed, all at a time when liberal thought emanating from Europe was supremely confident in its universality and cosmopolitanism.⁴⁶

India the Child

When writing on India, ‘childhood’ was a common theme all leading British thinkers used. To James Mill, India was still in the infancy of the “progress of civilization.”⁴⁷ Britain, the civilizing nation, was the parent. This infantilism of a whole nation became the basis, in the writings of both the Mills and Macaulay, for the justification in delaying democratic rights and representative institutions to the Indians. Kipling’s poetic flourish of the “white man’s burden” was already realized in the philosophies of Macaulay and the Mills.⁴⁸ John Locke maintained that the irrational worldview of the Indian ‘child,’ and the obstinate defiance with which she clung to it, needed to be altered through the medium of the English parental cane.⁴⁹ This justified the propping of imperial institutions because liberal institutions can only function with a requisite amount of reason, which children (read Indians) lack, ergo, it is in their best interests to be given over to protective parents (read Britain). Only at the end of a protracted ‘childhood’ will Indians be given the right to liberty, by which time they would have become sufficiently

⁴⁴ Ibid., 8.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 9.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 31.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 94.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 35.

reasonable to wield it responsibly. Thus successful in painting the Indian as infantile, superstitious and hopelessly unreasonable, the leading liberals, harbingers of democracy and freedom, help create an Empire vaster and more diverse than any in history.

Mill

John Stuart Mill was a leader in western political thought regarding freedom and liberty. Yet in the two most important of his works on liberal political frameworks, *Representative Democracy* and *On Liberty*, he quite visibly excludes the India question from the domain of his research.⁵⁰

The latter book includes the necessary requirements for the application of the principle of liberty which are, adulthood in individuals, and non-backwardness and peace in societies. Childhood, permanent retardation, superstition, unreason, and war can suspend the privilege of liberty.⁵¹

But a closer reading of ‘The Government of Dependencies by a Free State,’ a chapter in *Representative Government*, clearly shows the intellectual turmoil of a scholar on the one hand committed to the ideal of liberty, and on the other a supporter of colonialism.⁵² Colonized countries in the chapter are conveniently divided into those “of similar civilization to the ruling country; capable of and ripe for representative government: such as the British possessions in America and Australia” and “others, like India, [that] are still a great distance from that state.”⁵³

In short, Mill differentiated between dominions of settlement and the dominions of conquest. Mill is not just against the dismantling of the colonial superstructure, he is also adamantly opposed to the second category of countries being allowed to develop as democracies. “Such is

⁵⁰ Ibid., 65.

⁵¹ Ibid., 70.

⁵² Cited in Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid.

the ideal rule of a free people over a barbarous or semi-barbarous one.”⁵⁴ The Indians were only allowed “a choice of despotisms”⁵⁵, not democratic representative rule. To prevent India being viewed as a political and social deviant from other nations of the world, Mill nicely compares its eighteenth-century situation to that of prehistoric Britain: “The Druids among the ancient Britons . . . possessed many similar privileges and distinctions to those of the Brahmans.”⁵⁶

Thus, under such stultified conditions of society, “liberalism in the form of empire services the deficiencies of the past for societies that have been stunted through history. This in brief is the Janus-faced liberal justification of empire.”⁵⁷

Burke

India to Edmund Burke, unlike his contemporaries, was not a land of religion, myth and pervasive unreason. He was careful in trumpeting the superiority of English social and political systems. “Faults this nation [India] many have,” he wrote, “but God forbid we should pass judgement upon people who framed their laws and institutions prior to our insect origins of yesterday.”⁵⁸

Burke too used the childhood metaphor in his writings, but for the conduct of British officials posted in India. To him they were “school boys without tutors, minors without guardians, the world is let loose upon them, with all its temptations, and they are let loose upon the world with

⁵⁴ Ibid., 71.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 75.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 81.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 22.

all the power that despotism involves.”⁵⁹ Elsewhere Burke speaks in horrifying imagery of the British as “animated with all the avarice of age and all the impetuosity of youth, roll[ing] in one after another, wave after wave – and there is nothing before the eyes of the natives but an endless, hopeless prospect of new flights of birds of prey and passage, with appetites continually renewing for food that is continually wasting.”⁶⁰ This line of reasoning of Burke’s was the moral driving force behind the trial and impeachment of Warren Hastings the discredited Governor-General of Bengal.

Burke, in this way, was the singular exception of his contemporaries, at every point on the colonies, especially India, “on the side of the future.”⁶¹ This reverent humility can be traced back to his writings on the French Revolution which to him was all about “psychological naiveté and theoretical arrogance.”⁶²

Liberal Indian Thinkers

Liberalism took on a dual role for eighteenth-century Indians. On the one hand, it was used to reject the colonial political apparatus over India. On the other, colonialism was welcomed because it was the harbinger of liberal democratic principles. James Mill, Spencer, Rousseau and Tom Payne were heady wine for young India who envisioned the political future of their society on the lines demarcated by these thinkers.⁶³ Leading Indian intellectuals were taken by these ideas, and thus a bourgeois political and social order was believed to be the logical outcome of

⁵⁹ Ibid., 32.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 33.

⁶¹ Ibid., 155.

⁶² Ibid., 159.

⁶³ Panikkar, *Culture, Ideology, Hegemony*, 95.

British rule.⁶⁴ They began to become convinced of the eventual triumph of these ideals. Rammohan Roy's protest against the Press Regulation Act and Dadabhai Naoroji's characterization of colonial rule in India as 'un-British' were expressions of these premises.⁶⁵

Alternatives to Democracy

The influence of liberalism cannot be gainsaid. That manner of thinking was hugely influential in the minds of the leading Indian intellectuals, so much so that another alternative in the field of political institutions and practices was never sought or articulated.⁶⁶ But a search for an alternative was not completely absent in colonial Indian thought.

The religious reformer Vishnubawa Brahmachari in 1867 spearheaded the attempt to find a different form of polity and social organization separate from one based on democratic and constitutional principles. His treatise *Sukhadayaka Rajyaprakarani Nibandha*, 'An Essay on Beneficent Government', written in Marhati and translated into English in 1869, is an early specimen of such thinking.⁶⁷

The perspicacious Vishnu had had no formal training and was not a reformer or revivalist in the mold of Rammohan Roy or Dayanand Saraswati. He neither set up an organization nor started a movement. His work is an example of the kind that would have emanated from India had she been untouched by western influences. In *Sukhadayaka*, Vishnu realized a kind of political order and social framework that would ensure equitable distribution of agricultural and industrial

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Panikkar, *Colonialism, Culture, Resistance*, 126.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

goods.⁶⁸ Critics have shunned it for its simplicity and as an impracticable Hindu utopia⁶⁹, but Vishnu was at least sensitive to the inherent problems of distribution of work in an equal-rights society. He was a critic of caste, untouchability and the seclusion of women, was pleasantly unopposed to mechanization, with the railway and telegraph having a place in scheme.⁷⁰

Permanent Settlement

While the British were masters of India, they were having a go at transplanting their own institutions onto the native substratum they dominated. The Permanent Settlement was put into effect in Bengal in 1793. It was an attempt by Governor-General Lord Charles Cornwallis to graft the English landlord, at the height of his importance in England, onto Indian soil.⁷¹ Cornwallis had decided that the *zamindar* could be turned into a landlord who would establish cultivation as long as the guarantee that he would not be overtaxed held. The *zamindar* received a permanent lot of land, and kept one-tenths of its produce for himself, giving the government the remainder nine-tenths. The Permanent Settlement lasted until 1951 so in effect did deserve its name.⁷² But, in the end, it only ended up enabling parasitic landlordism.

At first the British mulcted the *zamindars* too high and turned out from their lands any who failed to bring in revenues.⁷³ Among the causes of the Mutiny of 1857, dispossessed *zamindars*

⁶⁸ Ibid., 127.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 130.

⁷¹ Moore, *Social Origins*, 345.

⁷² Ibid., 345.

⁷³ Ibid., 346.

were an important contributing factor, while newly established ones anchored their foreign overlords during the storm of rebellion.⁷⁴

Post Mutiny

After the Mutiny, British officials, especially in the Punjab, combined the offices of the judiciary and executive, and began an administration more despotic than before.⁷⁵ A complicated public law was written down based on modern legal systems while personal laws were still to be heavily influenced by custom and religion. Areas, such as Oudh, the Punjab and the Bengal Presidency, which had remained loyal to the British cause during the Mutiny and had supplied troops to quell the uprising, were rewarded. The policy of decreasing the influence of large landed families was abandoned because the Mutiny of 1857 had only strengthened the belief that the urban class could not be relied on for support and therefore the rural aristocracy was to be bolstered. Instead, a policy of combining property with authority among the landed elite was pursued.⁷⁶ Western Punjab received the lion's share in the generosity of their colonial overlords for loyalty during the Mutiny and service through the First World War. These areas are now Pakistan. This is important to note. As the British government recognized the centrality of the tribal and kinship groups in the societies of loyal areas, they preferred to accept customary law as being of foremost importance.⁷⁷

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Saiyid, *Muslim Women*, 1.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 3.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 7.

British Influence

The two main gifts of British dominion were peace and property. The third, industrial revolution, ended up flooding native markets with English textiles, destroying its significant shares in international trade.⁷⁸ Many Indian nationalists were of the opinion that India had been a manufacturing nation which the British ended up reducing to an agricultural one, all for their own self-seeking ends.⁷⁹ The handicraft industry was destroyed. Of course one cannot accept this thesis in its bald form: even when handicrafts were booming, India was an overwhelmingly agricultural nation. It was not just the liquidation of the estates of the landed elite that led to the Mutiny alone. Other factors, such as secularism, industry, western science, and evangelicalism all contributed as intrusive elements that threatened Indian society.

Stifled Democracy and Industry

Pax Britannica, the great peace the British brought to India, favoured the privileged sections of Indian society. British power rested on support from the many princes and landed gentry that dotted the Indian landscape. This support of the upper classes irked the ire of the commercial and trading classes as well as the native bourgeoisie who developed in the nineteenth-century. A decisive step in the development of parliamentary democracy is the formation of a reactionary coalition to undemocratic rule.⁸⁰ By preventing the rising urban leaders and the upper classes from uniting, English presence throttled the formation of such a reactionary coalition.⁸¹ This step is just as important in the development of parliamentary democracy as osmosis of secular

⁷⁸ Moore, *Social Origins*, 347.

⁷⁹ Moore, *Social Origins*, 348.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 354.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

thinking and scientific education are. Without any structural conditions favourable to these ideas, they remained at best mere literary playthings.⁸²

During the nineteenth-century, the British introduced India to the railroad and a substantial amount of irrigation. Yet growth remained contumaciously abortive because the moneylender and the landlord would pocket all economic surplus generated in the countryside. In other countries undergoing a similar transition, like Japan, economic surplus was used to take the first steps toward industrialization.⁸³ The English, however, were not in India to start an industrial revolution. Anglo-Saxon law and order bred the parasitic landlord to his most oppressive self and unlike Japan, India never industrialized rapidly. Although this blight was present in India in the form of corrupt 'zamindarism' long before the presence of the British, their two-century rule did allow it to spread and take deeper root.

Independence Era

In the days of the freedom struggle, the energies of the Indian leadership were concentrated in attaining political deliverance from colonial rule. Indian politicians and philosophers also tried to fathom what Nehru had described as "the Idea of India."⁸⁴ Many of these ideas were debated in the open and published so a larger audience could be reached. As time in the freedom struggle went by, these ideas were refined.

Indians began to look at their traditional heritage in a more critical light, even at the wistful praise that orientalist writers had showered on the ancient Indian polity. William Jones painted

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Ibid., 355.

⁸⁴ Som, *Gandhi, Bose, Nehru*, 162.

the ancient Sanskrit civilization as the “Athenians of Asia”⁸⁵ who had been decimated by Muslim conquests. Indian society, unable to recover from this blow, descended into the abyss of a centuries-long slumber of superstition and unreason which the colonial masters and the missionaries attempted to save them from.

Communalism

This general feeling of animosity towards Muslim rule, and Muslims in general, was fanned by British policies and strengthened communalism. The absence of Muslim participation in the political sphere and their descent into political isolation and the eventual dominance of national leadership by Hindus undermined the possibility of bringing about a rapprochement between the two communities.

Separate electorates were the first institutionalization of the two-nation theory. Published documents fully establish the fact that this was created by deliberate policy as an effective method to keep the Hindus and Muslims apart.⁸⁶ Lady Minto, the wife of the Viceroy hugely responsible for this, was gleeful that British power in India would last longer because of communal infighting.⁸⁷

Although the growth of national feeling, the direct result of English aggression, was an important aspect of the Indian political renaissance, the post-colonial conception of Hindu nationalism not just distorts the past but ironically has a lot in common with the imperialist history of James Mill,

⁸⁵ Ibid., 170.

⁸⁶ Panikkar, *Asia and Western Dominance*, 120.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

even though the former is dazzlingly glorious whilst the latter is a picture of a grotesquely primitive culture.⁸⁸

Waning British Rule

Opinion in India during the Great War was more pro-German than pro-Ally. Except among the ruling princes, there was no pro-British feeling remaining, and public opinion rejoiced at every report of German victory and felt depressed when the Allies were winning.⁸⁹ Germany had had no tradition of Asian conquest and was allied with the chief Muslim power, Turkey. The Indian soldier fighting on the Marne came back to India with different ideas of the *sahib*.

The British administration in India had to appeal to her subjects for moral support. Asking Indians to subscribe to war loans was accompanied with promises for democracy for themselves and freedom for their own cultures. Politically, a further weakening of the colonial and imperialist position came about as a result of President Wilson's fourteen points which in Asia was declared as a doctrine of liberation. It became difficult to proclaim self-determination of peoples as a great ideal for which Indians would die in European battlefields but which, however excellent, could not be applied to themselves.⁹⁰ The idea also that responsible government was a new departure but it should not be noted that it was only a distant objective and the immediate action proposed was only the development of self-governing institutions and that also was to be gradual.

⁸⁸ Sen, *The Argumentative Indian*, 140.

⁸⁹ Panikkar, *Asia and Western Dominance*, 199.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 200.

English political thinking on India underwent considerable change. Lionel Curtis in *Letters to the Indian People on Responsible Government* said that the only line of development for the Indians was parliamentary democracy, which should begin experimentally in certain provinces.⁹¹ An announcement by the British government in August 1917 laid down the policy in regard to India as “gradual development of self-governing institutions with a view to progressive realization of responsible government in India as an integral part of the British Empire.”⁹² The greatest evidence in advance in this direction is observable in the Lucknow Pact.

Tagore

Rabindranath Tagore was generally respected as ‘Gurudev’⁹³ and ‘The Great Sentinel.’⁹⁴ The greatest political tragedy, as he saw it came from the fact that “what was truly best in their own civilization, the upholding of dignity of human relationships, has no place in the British administration of this country.”⁹⁵ Tagore was a believer in the deliverance of Indians from their political overlords, but he was, at the same time, a critic of patriotism, which he criticized again and again in his writings. To Abala Bose, the wife of the great Indian scientist Jagadish Chandra Bose, he said in a letter, “Patriotism cannot be our final spiritual shelter; my refuge is humanity. I will not buy glass for the price of diamonds and I will never allow patriotism to triumph over humanity as long as I live.”⁹⁶ He even wrote on this theme in his novel, *Ghare Baire*, ‘Home and the World’. Martha Nausbaum, in her book *For Love of Country*, quotes from Tagore’s novel as

⁹¹ Ibid., 204.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Som, *Gandhi, Bose, Nehru*, 172.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 175.

⁹⁵ Sen, *The Argumentative Indian*, 107.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 108.

she initiates her renowned critique of patriotism: “I am willing to serve my country,” Nikhil the protagonist says, “but my worship I reserve for Right which is far greater than my country. To worship my country as a god is to bring a curse upon it.”⁹⁷

Nationalism, to Tagore, was corrosive, even if the hatred of groups of people might be far away from the minds of humane nationalist leaders like Gandhi. He even despised the rising nationalism in Japan, after having had been a strong admirer of the country’s strides in industrial development and economic progress.⁹⁸

The Indian freedom struggle was all about the struggle between modernity and tradition, at all levels, especially the political. Tagore was an enthusiastic participant of the *swadeshi* movement, chanting patriotic songs, partaking in long marches, and tying *rachis* on Muslim participants to strengthen communal harmony.⁹⁹ However, he was critical of the policy of boycotts and encouraged students, wherever and whenever he could, to return to their classrooms and their schools and continue their education. “The anarchy of emptiness,” he explained to them, “never tempts me, even when it is resorted to as a temporary measure.”¹⁰⁰

Indian National Congress

The movements that developed in the West during the French and American revolutions during the eighteenth-century influenced a small section of Indian intellectuals. Social reform and political movements of different groups and the Congress provided a platform for discussion and

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 109.

⁹⁹ Som, *Gandhi, Bose, Nehru*, 173.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

assertion of rights. The proponents of the rights were social reformers, liberal political leaders championing equality for Indians as citizens before British law. One of the many factors, which led to the organization of the Indian National Congress in 1885, was the failure of Indians to get the Ilbert Bill passed in its original form which proposed to give Indian magistrates the power to try British subjects in criminal cases.¹⁰¹

Emerging landed gentry and middle classes tended to perceive civil liberties as something that only advanced sections of the natives could enjoy and appreciate. In other words, rights became advantages conferred by colonial masters on preferred, advanced sections of India. In 1918, the Congress prepared a declaration of rights submitted to the British Parliament. It included the freedoms of speech, expression and assembly, and the right to be tried according to law, and above all freedom from racial discrimination.¹⁰²

The Motilal Nehru Committee of 1928 demanded fundamental rights for Indians that had been denied them. The British government rejected these demands. In 1936, Jawahrlal Nehru took the initiative to form the Indian Civil Liberties Union in Bombay in 1936 with Rabindranath Tagore as its president. “The idea of civil liberties,” Nehru said in his address to the founding conference, “is to have the right to oppose the government.”¹⁰³ In 1945, Tej Bahadur Sapru, a prominent lawyer and politician who helped draft the Indian Constitution, brought forth a proposal stressing the importance of fundamental rights. These were eventually incorporated in the Indian Constitution.¹⁰⁴ In this way, liberties and rights, enshrined in the Constitution were the product of the freedom struggle.

¹⁰¹ Shah, *Social Movements in India*, 243.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 244.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

Nehru

With all the appurtenances of an Englishman, and more at home with them than his fellow Indians, Jawaharlal Nehru was a liberal. An education at Harrow at the age of sixteen and then the London School of Economics at an impressionable age was enough to convince him of the practicality of liberal ideals. He had a glimpse of communist life when he accompanied his father, Motilal, to Moscow in December 1927 at the decennial celebrations of the 1917 Revolution.¹⁰⁵

Nehru's vision for India was one that departed from that of Gandhi's and took strides toward a modern future for the country away from a maze of tradition and superstition. This way of thinking was the direct result of an international education and exposure to Fabian socialist thinking in his youth.¹⁰⁶ Japan's frantic modernization and industrialization had impressed him greatly. He was deeply committed to liberal and secular values and democracy and the parliamentary functioning of institutions which he wanted to transplant onto Indian soil. At the same time, he had a deep distrust of western capitalist model thanks to the anti-imperialist bent of the nationalist movement, and looked to the Soviet model for inspiration.¹⁰⁷ This socialist thinking, in hindsight, ended up cocooning the country from external competition and encouraged unproductive state-sponsored undertakings. Staunch secularism, while attempting to separate religion and the state, ended up fostering feelings of communalism and caste loyalties.¹⁰⁸ His attempts to inject a spirit of practical progressiveness into the personal laws

¹⁰⁵ Som, *Gandhi, Bose, Nehru*, 116.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 2.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 2.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 3

riddled with tradition remained incomplete. His modernizing process was also rudely checked when constitutional guarantees proved incapable of raising various groups to the same level of development.¹⁰⁹ The Nehru legacy of laying the foundation of a democratic state did however survive his daughter Indira Gandhi's attempts to impose an emergency during her administration in the 70s.

In trying to cross the chasm between tradition and modernity, Nehru's resolution was, "Let us not say we are old, but that the old belongs to us, which suggests that we can with our heritage go forward tomorrow."¹¹⁰

Bose

In age and educational background, Nehru was closer to Subhash Chandra Bose, and the two of them could have provided a counterfoil to the conservative bent of Gandhi. But as time went by, the two moved further apart.

Bose was an interesting figure of the Indian independence movement. He venerated nationalist heroes like Kemal Ataturk¹¹¹ and often thought of himself a Mazzini or Garibaldi, leading the effort to free and unite his country from British oppression with Japanese help. Bose's thinking oscillated between liberality on the one hand and authoritarianism on the other and finally set on the latter. He created the Indian National Army, which was a cohesive fighting force, composed of individuals recruited from all creeds and faiths to fight against a common foe: the imperial government of British India. Sikhs, Muslims, Hindus and others trained to fight and mess

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 10.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 183.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 190.

alongside each other. “Men who had clung all their lives to their orthodoxy became cosmopolitans overnight.”¹¹² The women’s Rani of Jhansi regiment in the *Azad Hind Fauj* was also remarkable for organizing women to fight. These accomplishments were nothing short of revolutionary and an exoneration of Gandhi’s ideas.¹¹³

Growing up, Bose had been a man of less than average physical abilities, and this bothered him. Vivekananda, the Bengali reformer, had earlier in the century exhorted Indians to acquire physical strength and shed the stereotype of physical inferiority. Salvation, he had observed, will come through football not through the Gita.¹¹⁴ This made sense to Bose, who despised the ‘*Ferangi Bengali*’, weak and well-versed in English but hopelessly out of touch with Bengali society.¹¹⁵

Bose’s path led him to a rejection of peaceful liberal parliamentarianism as a means of throwing off the colonial yoke. Much to the consternation of the liberal-minded leaders of the Indian movement, Bose was willing to justify reaching out to Nazi Germany and seeking their help, despite harbouring a deep contempt for them. When he met Hitler in May 1942, he showed daredevil forthrightness in asking the Führer to remove sections in *Mein Kampf* which made derogatory references to India.¹¹⁶ In the figure of Bose, the Indian psyche flirted with the idea of a different path to independence, one of fascistic violence, the spearhead of which was going to be the Indian National Army.

The INA was militarily a disaster. But socially, it showed, on a limited scale, what communal harmony could look like, an ideal that had proven to be insidiously unattainable in India on the

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 214.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 80.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 89.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 148.

national scale until then. Bose's accomplishments were a matter of deep pride for Gandhi, who was the Army's most ardent supporter, even though he was adamantly against the use of violence. In fact, some members of the INA informed Gandhi that just before Bose's death in an air crash, had instructed them that should anything happen to him, they should return to India and take up the nonviolent cause of Congress.¹¹⁷ This greatly pleased and vindicated Gandhi.

To the poet Tagore, besides Nehru, Bose had been the only other 'modernist' in India. He had initially hailed the young man as *Deshnayak* or the 'nation's leader'.¹¹⁸ But Tagore ended up revising his opinion of Bose, and had not even responded favourably to Bose's suggestion several years later that he request Bernard Shaw to write a foreword to his book, *Indian Struggle*.¹¹⁹ The reason was that Bose and Tagore often clashed on the idea of nationalism. Bose often defended nationalism from Tagore's charges of its narrow, selfish, and aggressive path. Bose declared that nationalism, as practiced in India, was inspired by the highest ideals of *Satyam* (the true), *Shivam* (the good) and *Sundaram* (the beautiful).¹²⁰

Bose was an advocate of socialism as the perfect system for India, but his definition of socialism did not follow any western model and progressed in response to his perceptions of India's changing scenario and needs.¹²¹ He was quite definite that Bolshevist vagaries would not suit "our national requirements as well as our national genius."¹²² Bose envisioned a state of complete economic emancipation, state control of the means of production and the distribution of wealth and social equality. Bose was convinced that the materialistic interpretation of history would not find unqualified acceptance in India and nor would the "anti-religious and atheistic

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 158.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 187.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 188.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 189.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 193.

¹²² *Ibid.*

ethos of Russia” be appropriate in India, with its deep spiritual character.¹²³ He was an advocate of the need for “a strong central government” which would be directed by a responsible party run on a ‘democratic basis’, unlike the Nazi party based on the ‘leadership principle.’¹²⁴ He was much influenced by the logic of Kemal Ataturk who, while declaring a democracy for modern Turkey, had felt the need to put certain preventive restrictions on the people, lest early political crises shake the foundations of the new state.¹²⁵

Gandhi

Gandhi was never an admirer of the Westminster pattern of democracy, even on occasion likening it to a prostitute.¹²⁶ He appealed to the masses to have faith in a universal ethic that was beyond all kinds of religions, which proved to be very powerful.

Gandhi’s criticism was directed at the dominant themes of the Enlightenment, namely reason and science and did not feel that any of these concepts offered access to the truth. The western political system and civilization was to him like “a mouse gnawing while it is soothing us.”¹²⁷ Railways had disrupted the intricate balance of the country’s indigenous peoples whilst creating artificial famines and carrying disease over vast areas. Lawyers and doctors were reduced to merely profit-making professions rather than being humanitarian. He even countered

¹²³ *Ibid.*, 194.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 195.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 196.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 11.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 108.

Rabindranath Tagore's criticism of boycotting 'imperial' education institutions, saying that the only kind of education they encouraged was aimed at creating godless clerks and interpreters.¹²⁸

Gandhi had alternatives to the liberal shibboleths of parliamentary democracy and bourgeois social order. His was a village *swaraj* system, in which each village would take care of the needs of its citizens and would be largely independent of other villages except in certain other changes, run by a local government of a *panchayat* of five, ensuring perfect democracy and individual freedom.¹²⁹ The individual, reared from childhood to be mindful of social commitment would, through a sense of responsibility, make an overseeing government bureaucracy redundant.¹³⁰ There would be instead a "state of enlightened anarchy in which each person will become his own ruler."¹³¹ This vision of Gandhi's resounded in Tagore's celebrated songs: "We are all kings in our reign of kings."¹³²

These were some of the ways the thought leaders of India reacted to the political modernity introduced by the British. Some like Nehru were convinced of its practicability in the Indian context. Others, like Bose and Gandhi, were not. However, our story will remain undone if we fail to mention the communist attempt to set up a socio-political system in India that was at odds to the bourgeois liberal order.

M. N. Roy and Communism in India

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 174.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 177.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 178.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*

¹³² *Ibid.*

The Soviets announced their support for the struggle of independence in India on the grounds that they were opposed to imperialism everywhere. Imperialism to communist thought is the highest expression of capitalism and its destruction by a nationalist movement is a progressive stage in evolution.

The most ardent promotor of Communist ideals was the Indian revolutionary M. N. Roy. Roy was based abroad and it was from there that he directed the communist activities in India. In Tashkent, he gave military training to Indians and schooled them in communism. Most Indians there were *muhajirun*, people involved in the Khilafat Movement launched in reaction to the Treaty of Sevres, and who were making their way to Turkey.¹³³ The political climate was ripe for violent reaction to British rule, especially in February of 1922 when Gandhi had called off his civil disobedience campaign in the aftermath of the Chari Chura. The move had frustrated a whole cadre of followers.

A year prior, Roy published *India in Transition*, predicting the imminent collapse of Gandhism because of its internal contradictions.¹³⁴ He fulminated against Gandhi for pushing Indian society towards a relapse into primitive pre-British days.¹³⁵ The masses, he argued, who had eagerly consented to the movement as they saw in it a means to end their exploitation, were in for a rude shock when they would discover that the movement's chief concern was the aggrandizement of the Indian bourgeoisie.¹³⁶ He attacked the Swarajist stand of peaceful and constitutional change,

¹³³ Dushka Saiyid, *Exporting Communism to India: Why Moscow Failed* (Islamabad: National Institute of Historical and Cultural Research, 1995), 32.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, 34.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, 35.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, 36.

pointing out that the promise of equal partnership by British imperialists was a myth designed only to make upper-class Indians their junior partners.¹³⁷

But Roy was hopelessly off mark. The power of Gandhi's vision was in its mass appeal and mobilization on a massive scale, not philosophical formulas or empty theory. To achieve a mass following and maintain it, Gandhi did not need a consistent theory.¹³⁸ He also had expected native capitalists and the imperialists to clash as capitalism developed in India but did not consider that the resentment of the exploited masses may be turned away from the bourgeoisie towards the foreign colonialists, which is exactly what happened.¹³⁹ Roy's ultimate argument, of the Communist International seizing the leadership of the nationalist struggle in India, and that the peasants and the proletariat assuming leadership in the place of the bourgeoisie ultimately ended in failure.

Communist Challenge to Liberal Order

But the Russian Revolution changed the character of the Indian national movement. Before the October Revolution, the India struggle had been without a social or economic objective.¹⁴⁰ Witnessing the way a 'backward' country like Russia could industrialize in a few years of planned production gave hope to the independence movement.

Even the intellectual dominance of India by the British was challenged by the Revolution. In the first two decades of the twentieth century, philosophers like Dewey, Russell, Bergson, Croce,

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, 48.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, 36.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, 37.

¹⁴⁰ Panikkar, *Asia and Western Dominance*, 192.

Laski, and Anatole France were all the rage.¹⁴¹ Then they were dropped for progressive writers who became not merely a fashion but a movement. With the emergence of the famed writer Prem Chand in India, the century-long reign of western letters may be said to have come to a close.¹⁴² Many doubts were cast in people's minds who had hitherto unquestioningly accepted the dominance of the West in all things.

The Failure of Communism in India

However, communism failed to take root in independence-era India. One of the reasons is that in countries like India, the effect of the Russian Revolution was not the same as in China for example, because social reorganization had to some extent already taken place and reform had broken down hundreds of years of old tradition. Unlike China, there was no social and ethical anarchy in India and communist thought, instead of being revolutionary, remained mainly an intellectual development.¹⁴³

Also, Roy's ideas were met with hostility in Congress circles.¹⁴⁴ The most important person to the Communists in the Indian National Congress was the *Swaraj Party* founder-leader C. R. Das, and even he was only a sympathizer and not a full-blown communist.¹⁴⁵ Bolshevism's methods of violence and the use of force repulsed the majority of Congressmen who stood opposed to it. Even Roy had gone overboard in emphasizing the use of force in bringing about necessary social change. The political climate was one of *idee fixe* for Gandhism, which the violent Bolshevism

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 192.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, 193.

¹⁴⁴ Saiyid, *Exporting Communism to India*, 51.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

could not match. Even reputed socialists like C. R. Das, when they tried to confront Gandhi, were roundly defeated.¹⁴⁶

Bolshevism's emphasis on violence was thus over the top. This perception was partly due to British rule, which was not especially violent and bloody. The iron hand wore a velvet glove¹⁴⁷ that allowed for nonviolent civil disobedience to flourish and it did. Violent overthrow remained unpopular in an atmosphere of such political leniency.

Another reason for the failure of communism to take root in India, besides its distasteful advocacy of violence, was the efficient crackdown on communists by the British government. By the end of 1922, *muhajirun* who had been receiving military training in Moscow and Tashkent began infiltrating back to India in the hopes of instigating revolution.¹⁴⁸ British authorities, ever vigilant, rounded them up as they crossed the frontiers. The Communist Party was declared illegal in India.¹⁴⁹

Roy too had his shortcomings. Although the most well-versed in communist theory and its most energetic advocate, he never went to India to take charge of events at the grassroots and preferred to direct the movement at a distance from Europe, which alienated Indian workers.¹⁵⁰ Ultimately, the Indian communists remained largely weak, disorganized, and with a disunited leadership, and failed to make any inroads with the masses.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 52.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 79.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 53

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 65.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 61.

In short, this is how the communist dream in twentieth-century India came to an end and India, after independence advanced towards the realization of a bourgeois liberal order, an order that has survived to this day.

Chapter III: Religion

Introduction

The renaissance and the enlightenment movements in India, unlike their dichotomized counterparts in Europe, were intertwined and simultaneous.¹ In the following chapter we look at the effect growing colonial modernity had on the religiosity of Indian society and how a slow development of a secular ethos came about in indigenous thinking. It would also do well, however, to be mindful of some of the germs of a secular bent that existed in native society long before European contact.

As we have seen in the previous chapters, one of the consequences of western dominance was the way Indian cultures and traditions were defined in contrast to western culture. More 'exotic' writings, such as the *Bhagavad Gita* or the Tantric texts, because they differed from western secular writings, elicited a greater interest.² Other Indian writings in Sanskrit and Pali have a significant literary corpus on atheism and agnosticism, which demonstrate a long history of heterodoxy and mutability.³ Similarly, there is a vast literature on non-religious subjects such as mathematics epistemology, natural sciences, economics, linguistics and others which has been neglected.⁴

¹ Panikkar, *Colonialism, Culture, Resistance*, 141.

² Sen, *The Argumentative Indian*, 285.

³ *Ibid.*, 285.

⁴ *Ibid.*

Instead of developing challenging the West's unique claim to secular values, Indians and most Asians have responded with the pride of distance.⁵ This is in no way to claim that secularism and humanitarianism have flourished in all civilizations of the world equally. To say that would be an untruth. But to also contend that these values are only of western origin is false; these ideas are not culture specific.⁶

In order to counterpose the view that secularism has had no roots in India, we must consider secularism as an idea that is not only a political phenomenon but one that has a social and intellectual aspect also. Intellectually, the Indian mind has indeed undergone a slow but transformative process of secularization promoted by the Indian Renaissance. Strides towards religious universalism, humanism and rationalism are most significant. An attempt to erase distinctions between religions has been ardently attempted and religious practices critiqued rationally.

Ancient Heterodoxy and Secularism

A munificent affinity to heterodoxy and diversity, as stated above, was one of the contributing factors to the eventual democratization and secularization of modern India.⁷ Speaking of diversity, India was never a 'Hindu' country before the arrival of Islam. Buddhism was the dominant religion in India for nearly a millennium. In fact, Chinese scholars would often describe India in their texts as the 'Buddhist kingdom.'⁸ While on the subject of Hinduism, we should keep in mind that historically, it was never a unified religion; seeing it as such is only a

⁵ *Ibid.*, 286.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 287.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 16.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 56.

recent development.⁹ ‘Hindu’ as a word was used as a signifier of location, not religious adherence. Persian and Arabic texts detail Muslims living in India as ‘Hindavi’ Muslims, while there were ‘Hindoo Muslims’ and ‘Hindoo Christians’ described in early British documents.¹⁰

The greatest evidence for diversity in ancient India is the survival, well into modern times, of different calendars, each associated with a religion of its own: Jainism, Buddhism, Islam, Hinduism, Christianity, and Zoroastrianism.¹¹ Besides calendars, the most important treatise that has influenced political life in ancient India is Kautilya’s masterwork, the *Arthashastra*, which is Machiavellian but respectful to religious and social custom yet undeniably secular.¹² However true all that may be, we must be wary of falling into the trap of painting an overly romantic picture as regards cultural synthesis in ancient India.

Universalism And Tolerance

Religious diversity created the need to engage with the universal. So spoke the Upanishads: “As the different streams having their sources in different places all mingle their water in the sea, so, O Lord, the different paths men take through different tendencies, various though they appear, crooked or straight, all lead to Thee.”¹³ The Quran says the same in words that differ but slightly: “O Mankind! We have created you from a single pair of male and female, constituted into diverse peoples and nations so that you may know and cooperate with one another.”¹⁴

⁹ Ibid., 310.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid., 17.

¹² Ibid., 25.

¹³ Panikkar, *Colonialism, Culture, Resistance*, 97.

¹⁴ Ibid.

Non-religious ancient Indian literature is filled with vistas of tolerance and the acceptance of religious variance. Classical Sanskrit dramas such as Sudraka's *Mricchakatikam* (The Little Clay Cart) and *Mudraraksasam* (The Signet of the Minister) condemn all kinds of religious persecution.¹⁵

Medieval Harmony

Universal Religion

During medieval India religion was undoubtedly a matter of great contention but at the same time, there was an attempt towards universalism. The universal perspective was taken up by Hindu *Bakhti* and Muslim *Sufi* movements. The *Sufis* incorporated a vast corpus of Hindu religious thinking into their philosophical system¹⁶ and the *Bhakti* movement strove to transgress all particularisms in an attempt to explore the truth inherent in all religions and ameliorate entrenched differences. The concept of an impersonal God, which the *Nirguna Bhaktas* shared with the *Vedantins* enabled them to underline unity rather than difference and seek religious truth not through dogmatic ritual but pious submission to an impersonal God.¹⁷ Their endeavours would inspire a generation of religious reformers in the centuries to come.

Poets and Kings

¹⁵ Sen, *The Argumentative Indian*, 19.

¹⁶ Panikkar, *Colonialism, Culture, Resistance*, 97.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 98.

Medieval poets, such as Kabir, Nanak, Khusrau, Dadu, Sena and Ravi-das, not to mention a number of distinguished women poets such as Mira Bai, all wove the composite fabric of interreligious harmony and tolerance into their poetry.¹⁸

Mughal kings had been historically predisposed towards accepting diversity in religions. Many courtiers of Aurangzeb did not see eye to eye with his bigoted policies. His own son Akbar fought against him, allied with none other than the son of Shivaji, the Hindu king Raja Sambhaji.¹⁹ Aurangzeb's elder brother Dara Shikoh had been in thrall with Hindu scripture and philosophy, comparing and praising its likeness to the Koran.²⁰ Dara translated the *Ramayana*, *Gita*, *Upanishads*, and *Yogavasishta*, into Persian²¹ and it was through these translations that the scholar par excellence and founder of the *Royal Asiatic Society*, William Jones, first came into contact with sacred Hindu philosophy. Mirza Jan-i-Janan Mazhar, an eminent Islamic scholar, who received the robe of permission from three different orders, commended the religious ideas in Hindu scriptures to his disciples²² and popular Bengali translations of the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* epics were accomplished under patronage of the Muslim Pathan kings of Bengal.²³

Medieval Enlightened Despotism

The third great Mughal emperor, Jalal-ud-Din Muhammad Akbar, despite having had been celebrated as the promised millenarian earlier in his life, laid the foundation of a secular state for the first time in India. This was at a time when heretics and religious deviants were being burnt

¹⁸ Sen, *The Argumentative Indian*, 19.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 61.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Panikkar, *Colonialism, Culture, Resistance*, 97.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ Sen, *The Argumentative Indian*, 60.

at the stake in Europe. To Akbar's mind, "no man should be interfered with on account of religion, and anyone is to be allowed to go over to a religion that pleases him."²⁴ The religion that he launched, and was chief patriarch of, was called *Din-i-Ilahi* or the 'Religion of God.' It was an amalgam of different aspects of various religions cherry-picked by Akbar himself, into a concoction of worship and ritual that largely remained the purview of elite nobles and court sycophants. Although reviled by the pious classes, then as well as now, in truth, when Akbar passed away, the Islamic theologian Abdul Haq pronounced that he had died a Muslim, recanting his heterodox views.²⁵ We can ascertain the accuracy of this claim only so much. What we do know, for sure, is that whilst alive, Akbar had championed what he called *rahi aql* (the path of reason), insisting in the face of several revolts and popular uprisings on the need for open dialogue and free choice.²⁶

Akbar defied the ambit of social tradition through the use of reason a great number of times. He was opposed to child marriage, then a perfectly normal custom.²⁷ He also looked down on the Hindu practice of forbidding widows from marrying again: "In a religion that forbids the remarriage of the widow [Hinduism], the hardship is much greater."²⁸ Observing the Muslim practice of giving the daughter the smaller share of inheritance, he remarked trenchantly that "a smaller share of inheritance is allowed to the daughter, though owing to her weakness, she deserves to be given a larger share."²⁹ He would even use reason to defend the things he did not like. Although not taken to smoking tobacco, he objected to a courtier's argument against its use,

²⁴ Ibid., 18.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid., 32.

²⁷ Ibid., 290.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

saying, “we must not reject a thing that has been adopted by people of the world, merely because we cannot find it in our books; or how shall we progress?”³⁰

Akbar’s thesis was that morality should be guided by critical reasoning and that reason ought not to be subordinated to the marshland of tradition: “Reason reigns supreme because even when disputing reason, one would be obliged to give a reason for one’s disputation.”³¹ This was at a time when Giordano Bruno lit up the stake at Campo dei Fiori in Rome.

The Jesuits

In 1541, Francis Xavier, a student of Ignatius Loyola who founded the *Society of Jesus*, set out to conquer India for Christianity. A humble man, upon arriving, he chose not to be carried to the Archbishop’s palace in Goa, but walked barefoot to a leper hospital to wash sore feet.³² The Jesuit missions he established worked with enthusiasm but progress was slow until Father Roberto de Nobili acquired a fair mastery of Sanskrit and Hindu scripture and met in argument the learned Brahmans of Madura. This custom was all in accordance to *Sastrarthavada*, the ancient, well-established practice of debating religion before a learned audience.³³ Nobili’s attempts to present Christian teaching in Upanishadic thought may have impressed the Brahmans but angered the local episcopacy and he was recalled, with truncated hopes, to Rome. Hence, intolerance of all things Indian would be the missionary norm in India.³⁴

³⁰ Ibid., 291.

³¹ Ibid., 76.

³² Panikkar, *Asia and Western Dominance*, 240.

³³ Ibid., 281.

³⁴ Ibid.

The Jesuit fathers took the same spirit of intolerance to the Mughal court. Although at first received with abundant courtesy at the *Ibadat Khana* (House of Worship) because Akbar was greatly intrigued by the Christian faith, their acrimony towards the exponents of other religions was soon unwelcome and the missionaries had to leave the capital without the prospect of converting the ‘great oriental despot.’³⁵

The Colonial Period

The colonial period first introduced a ‘proper’ conception of secularism to the Indian subcontinent as well as the Christian faith, systemically through several hundred missions. A modern system of education acquainted the natives with the latest developments in western secular thinking.

Christian Missionaries

When the British wrested political control from the Muslims in northern India, Hinduism found itself equal to Islam for the first time in seven hundred years. The Islamic machinery for proselytization had been weak and had converted locals in fits and starts. The Christian missionaries were a different breed. Although they did not use force like Islam, they came armed with the newest methods of propaganda.³⁶

³⁵ Ibid., 281.

³⁶ Ibid., 240.

The missionaries' success in the long run, however, did not measure up to their enthusiasm. They had predicted the dissolution of Hindu society and had devotedly hoped for the conversion of the intellectual class. Neither showed any signs of materialization. In fact, the new learning they brought was swiftly assimilated into Hinduism, and its effects were visible in a revived ecumenical religion based on the *Vedanta*.³⁷

There are many more reasons to explain the eventual failure of the missionaries. In the first, the doctrinaire moral superiority of the missionaries and their alleged monopoly of truth and revelation were strange and unreasonable to Hindu and Buddhist ears.³⁸

Secondly, Christian proselytization was strongly associated with aggressive imperialism in the minds of the Indians. Diplomatic pressure, extra-territoriality and sometimes the support of gunboats clearly showed that the government was in thrall with foreign missionaries.³⁹

Thirdly, the missionaries attempted to inculcate, unconsciously or otherwise, a sense of European superiority in the minds of the Indians which produced a reaction. No Asian people acknowledged the cultural and moral superiority of the Europeans, or the 'effeteness' of the East, even during the days of unchallenged colonial supremacy. Missionaries who stressed the glories of European cultural achievement only strengthened perceptions of western cultural aggression.⁴⁰

Finally, the endless pettifoggery among the many Christian sects severely handicapped their work. This was coupled with the growth of unbelief in Europe in the nineteenth-century and the crisis in European civilization, following the First World War and the October Revolution. These broke whatever spell Christianity had among certain classes of Indians and with the eventual

³⁷ Ibid., 242.

³⁸ Ibid., 297.

³⁹ Ibid., 297.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

disappearance of British power, Christianity assumed its natural position as one of the many religions of India.⁴¹

A Secular Education

While the missionaries were busy proselytizing Christianity, the government of British India introduced a systemic secular education to the Indians to counter the cultural imbalance. But modern scholarship has overemphasized the liberalizing effect of an English education for the Indians which remained limited to a small urban fraction of the population. The rural mass of people, unenthused and unaffected, remained enclosed within centuries of dogma and tradition.⁴²

A secular education did not completely succeed in rubbing out religious identity and after the nineteenth-century communal identities became the rallying cry of political mobilizers. Even the reformers, the harbingers of social and cultural change, as we shall see, often failed to eradicate caste and religious prejudices from within their own families.⁴³

Roy and Hindu Reformation

Nevertheless, the colonial period oversaw the attempted restructuring of the great religions of India. The Hindu reformation of the nineteenth-century is one of the modern century's great movements which had massive and far-reaching effects. This was a slow process happening over

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Panikkar, *Colonialism, Culture, Resistance*, 46.

⁴³ Ibid.

a hundred years and because it was mostly internal, passed unnoticed.⁴⁴ It is important to understand and appreciate this reformation if we are to fully fathom the consequences and effects of western education on Indian society.

Rammohan Roy, whom we have met earlier, is often considered to be the father of Hindu reformation. His move to reform came in the wake of Christian missionary attacks on Hinduism. Roy took to the study of Hebrew and Greek to better acquaint himself with the minutiae of Christianity, but his study took him past all that to the well of European liberalism. He was greatly influenced by D'Holbach, Condorcet, Diderot and the others and has often been called the last of the great Encyclopaedists.⁴⁵ His wide reading of liberal authors led him to reject Christ, instead appealing to the humanism of European thought, its ethics and its general approach to the problems of life.⁴⁶ He founded the *Brahmo Samaj*, which has often been belittled as a mongrelized Christian dilution of Hinduism.⁴⁷ It was in reality an attempted acculturation of the *Upanishads* with the Enlightenment, not Christianity.⁴⁸ But more on that later.

Roy wrote several polemics on religion which were not just theological debates but had practical connotations as well. He argued not just for monotheism but also for human dignity and rationality as opposed to religious degradation and superstition.

Between 1815 and 1819 Roy produced several works on the *Vedanta* in Bengali, Hindustani and English, which he published and had distributed at his own expense.⁴⁹ Word travelled fast and

⁴⁴ Panikkar, *Asia and Western Dominance*, 240.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 241.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ Sen, *Rammohun Roy*, 43.

his fame reached the shores of faraway North America.⁵⁰ For his pains an invidious orthodox community labelled him a destroyer of Hinduism. To Roy that was an absurd accusation because he did not create “a new-fangled faith from the ashes of the old but rescued a monotheistic strand of Hinduism from polytheistic irrationality.”⁵¹

The publications of British orientalists like Wilkins, Jones, Colebroke, and Wilson, deeply influenced Roy’s thoughts on religious reformation.⁵² “I must confess how much I feel indebted to Doctor H. H. Wilson,” he wrote.⁵³ Gandhi would also later trace the roots of his nonviolent streak of thought from the researches of western scholars like Wilson.⁵⁴ At any rate, this stresses our older argument once again that the reformation of Hinduism, particularly in Roy’s mind, did not occur in a vacuum, but in full contact with the pearls of Enlightenment thinking.

It was for this reason that Roy was completely for the Unitarians coming to India with the purposes of spreading western education. He also lent support to the Presbyterian Church of Scotland which was particularly adept in the field of publicizing education reform, especially through the efforts of men such as Alexander Duff, an educator par excellence.⁵⁵

After he had accomplished much intellectually, Roy banded like-minded friends into the *Atmiya Sabha* (Friendly Association) whose purpose was “the dissemination of religious truth and promotion of free discussions of theological subjects.”⁵⁶ Members were drawn from affluent and influential sections of Bengali society.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 44.

⁵¹ Ibid., 45.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid., 46.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 65.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 46.

Roy's overtures at the *Sabha* won over the orientalist Reverend William Adam, which was a bitter pill to swallow for his missionary colleagues. An evangelist who had come to convert the heathens, Adam had been himself converted by one, and that too while studying the Christian scriptures!⁵⁷ It became common for the missionaries to deride their erstwhile colleague as 'the Second fallen Adam.'⁵⁸

Vivekananda

Besides Roy, Swami Vivekananda was the most ardent advocate for Vedantic reformation. A Bengali man educated in western ways, he fervently declared his unbelief in "a religion that does not wipe out the widow's tears or bring a piece of bread to the orphan's mouth."⁵⁹ The chief function of his movement as regards India was: "To find the common bases of Hinduism and to awaken the national consciousness the masses."⁶⁰

Some major changes to popular Hinduism came about partly through the Swami's untiring exertions. Child marriage was abolished, widows were permitted to remarry, and caste began to crumble. Thus spoke Vivekananda: "Beginning from Buddha down to Rammohan Roy, everyone made the mistake of holding caste to be a religious institution . . . But in spite of all the ravings of the priests, caste is simply crystallized social institution, which after doing its service is filling the atmosphere of India with stench."⁶¹

⁵⁷ Ibid., 67.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Pannikar, *Asia and Western Dominance*, 243.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid., 244.

Brahmo Samaj

By the 1820s, India was immensely influenced by the current of European thought. The *Brahmo Samaj* lived up to this ideal. Its social message was to westernize and purge Hinduism of superstition, to raise the status of women, and to fight relentlessly against caste.⁶² Educated Hindus, wary of tradition, yet unsettled by zealous missionary attacks on their religion, found a way out in the syncretic message of the *Samaj* which introduced a modern approach to Indian problems.⁶³

Roy attempted to start a ‘church’ of his own in 1823, inspired by Unitarian ideas mixed with elements of the indigenous.⁶⁴ Adams was the minister but it soon closed its doors thanks to a tenuous public response.⁶⁵ The *Brahmo Samaj* was born from this ‘Hinduized’ Unitarian Church. *Brahmo Samaj* literally means ‘Divine Society.’⁶⁶ As the story goes, Roy and a few friends were returning from a Unitarian service when a question was raised: “What need is there for us to go to the prayer-house of strangers to perform worship? We ought to erect a house of our own in which to worship one God.”⁶⁷ The conversation that ensued laid the foundation of the *Samaj*.

Members of the *Samaj* began meeting regularly on Saturday evenings. But ministry was still kept for Brahmans only, a fact which has been ridiculed because the association had been founded on egalitarian principles.⁶⁸ The *Samaj* was, nevertheless, not a new religion but a fraternity ever ready with an effusive welcome to members of all religions who wanted to worship ‘the Author

⁶² Ibid., 242.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Sen, *Rammohun Roy*, 85.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 86.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 88.

and Preserver of the Universe.⁶⁹ The universal theistic church that Roy founded in the *Brahmo Samaj* was eventually institutionalized as the *Nabha Bidham* by his successor, Keshub Chandra Sen.⁷⁰

Islamic Reformation

Muslim reformers, such as Haji Mohammed Hashim and Sanaullah Makti Tangal, also reacted to the onslaught of the Christian missionaries. Tangal toured Kerala and his backward community Mappila, rebutting Christian assaults on his faith.⁷¹ Many Islamic reformers, including Tangal, eventually came to adopt a view similar to that of the Hindu reformers: entente with the western.

To Ahmed Khan, the leading Islamic reformer of his time, reason was a good guiding principle on religious matters. “I came to the conclusion,” he argued, “that the only means of obtaining knowledge, conviction of faith, is reason . . . But if knowledge or conviction of faith is not based on reason, then their achievements in any age or period of time are impossible.”⁷² Khan believed that the need of the hour was to interpret Islam through a rational lens which suited the modern age. He also applied this primacy of reason to the *ahadis*, or traditions of the Islamic Prophet Muhammed. All *ahadis* in opposition to reason were rejected out of hand.⁷³

The Muslim orthodoxy responded to his modernizing mission with hostile venom and tried frantically to ostracize him. His remarkable mastery of Islamic religious texts was mocked; he was “as skilled in religion as a monkey who has fallen into a pan of indigo and considers himself

⁶⁹ Ibid., 92.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 98.

⁷¹ Panikkar, *Colonialism, Culture, Resistance*, 71.

⁷² Ibid., 34.

⁷³ Ibid.

to be a peacock.”⁷⁴ But Khan remained obstinately critical of outmoded patterns of thinking. “The old Muhammadan books and the tone of their writers,” he said harshly, “do not teach the followers of Islam independence of thought, perspicuity and simplicity nor do they influence them to arrive at the truth of matters in general; on the contrary they receive and teach men to veil their meaning, to embellish their speech with fine words, to describe things wrongly and in irrelevant terms.”⁷⁵

Humanism in India

We now approach the study of humanism in the Indian context. In India, the humanist perspective was limited to a bourgeois outlook.⁷⁶ In Europe, the Renaissance and Humanism movements brought the temporal plight of the people into focus, away from the otherworldliness of medieval times. This is the only aspect of the movements which the Indian Renaissance shares with its European counterpart: that burst in creativity that swept Europe, hallmark of her humanist movement, is poignantly absent in India.⁷⁷ In pre-colonial India, the religious sects had been preoccupied with propitiating the gods and gaining salvation. In colonial India, religious reform turned to the problems of existence. Vivekananda, the high priest of neo-Hinduism, subordinated spirituality to material needs.⁷⁸

At the same time, religious sanction was sought as the *ultima ratio* in the argument for social change. Scriptures were studied to pragmatic ends. Religiously backed social norms could only

⁷⁴ Zaheer Baber, *The Science of Empire: Scientific Knowledge, Civilization, and Colonial Rule in India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998), 227.

⁷⁵ Panikkar, *Culture, Ideology, Hegemony*, 10.

⁷⁶ Panikkar, *Colonialism, Culture, Resistance*, 35.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

be demolished using an agglomeration of arguments emanating from religious sources. That is why even agnostics like Vidyasagar confessed that “he had not taken up his pen in defense of widow remarriage till he was convinced of Vedic sanction.”⁷⁹ Scripture, as we have seen in the case of Roy, was even used to justify the abolition of caste, and polytheism.⁸⁰

With rising humanism, the religious exploitation of the priests was highlighted. Priests lost their monopoly on scriptural knowledge and were no longer the sole mediators between worshipper and god. The most glaring example of religious exploitation in nineteenth-century India was that of the maharajas of the *Vallabhachari* sect in Bombay who submitted female devotees to grotesque acts of sexual exploitation.⁸¹ Their misdemeanours when exposed in a libel suit that undermined religious leaders’ hold on unassuming followers.

This was a time for the democratization of knowledge. Rammohan Roy blazed the way in freeing scriptural knowledge from the priesthood⁸² while Dayanand Saraswati advocated for the rights of non-Brahmans to read and interpret the *Vedas*.⁸³ The new crop of reformers was much bolder than the *Bhakti* saints and other heterodox sects of old. Through the work of the newcomers, the office of the guru as a channel of communication between the devotee and the divine was permanently challenged.⁸⁴ This was a new ethos, one that reflected the changing times.

Rationalism and the Critique of Religion

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Ibid., 36.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

Religion had historically been a means of legitimizing the oppressed condition of the peoples of India and helped prevent them from mulling too much over the cruelty of their rulers. *Karma* and *maya* encapsulated the legitimate and illusory characters of the Hindu religion respectively.⁸⁵ Therefore, “the abolition of religion as the *Karmatic* and *Mayan* happiness of the people was required for their real happiness.”⁸⁶

The rational critique of religion became a *cause célèbre* among the leading intellectuals in nineteenth-century India. Roy’s first book, the eclectic *Tuhfat al-Muwahiddin*, was an early expression of this critique.⁸⁷ The text was composed in 1802 in which he brushed shoulders with atheism. Although not denying the existence of God, he was only willing to accept divine presence with a nod to pragmatic purposes, for to him belief in a deity was necessary to keep the conduct of men and women in society proper.⁸⁸ This is interestingly reminiscent of Voltaire’s own amusing quip: “I want my lawyer, tailor, valet, even my wife, to believe in God. I think that if they do I shall be robbed less and cheated less.”⁸⁹

Roy was quick in abandoning the revelation and supernatural elements of religion, which were looked upon as just a means to preserve the existing property relations and to regulate social intercourse.⁹⁰ He also extended rational explanations to social and natural phenomena. Demonstrability was his sole criterion for a thing’s truth. And truth is never repugnant to reason.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 30.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 31.

⁸⁷ Sen, *The Argumentative Indian*, 31.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

But his criticism of religions as elaborate systems of human deception was a bit too radical for the times and he later gave up this extreme position also.⁹¹ His successors, Akshay Kumar Dutt, and the members of *Young Bengal* upheld the use of reason and roundly rejected any form of Hinduism riven by superstition and irrationality.

At about the same time, other thinkers were expressing agnostic and atheistic ideas. The most prominent example to come to mind is that of Henry Vivian Derozio, a young charismatic lecturer of English language and history at the Hindu College, who was brought down with charges of blasphemy and corrupting the youth.⁹² Derozio's ideas rippled through Indian society, and shaped Akshay Kumar Dutt's rising skepticism.

Dutt became the staunchest rationalist of colonial India and managed to raise the debate on religion to the public level.⁹³ His motto, "universal nature is our scripture, pure rationalism is our preceptor," rung in intellectual circles all over India.⁹⁴ Like Roy, he too rejected supernaturalism and any social or natural phenomena which did not have a logical and mechanical explanation. He maintained that child marriage ought to be outlawed based solely on the bad effects it had on society.⁹⁵ Medical opinion and not priestly sanction should be the final wager in reaching a decision.⁹⁶ Dutt also argued that the *Vedas* was repugnant to reason so could not be infallible and opposed worship as irrational, a position also too radical for its time.⁹⁷

⁹¹ Panikkar, *Colonialism, Culture, Resistance*, 32.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 33.

⁹³ *Ibid.*

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

Keshub Chandra Sen also faulted Hindu scriptures for their irrationality.⁹⁸ But like many others later in life, he would admit to the limits of human reason. Sen emphasized individual conscience which he called *adesha* or ‘intuition’.⁹⁹ This became a central part of his religious thought.

Some intellectuals were even more outlandishly radical. Gopal Hari Deshmukh, popularly Lokhitavadi, authored the *Shatapatre*, one hundred letters that dismissed even the pragmatic importance of religion.¹⁰⁰ Religion, to him, was a human construct made to serve human beings and any tenets that undermined human happiness and promoted human suffering should be consigned to the dustbin of human ideological rejects. He was baffled by the ministrations that several reformers, Roy among them, stooped to give to Vedic authority, and believed scripture to be, constrained by space and time, irrelevant to the needs of nineteenth-century India.¹⁰¹

Universalism in the Colonial Period

Almost all of the abovementioned thinkers carried forward the syncretic approach of the medieval *Bhaktas* in dealing with the diverse religions of the subcontinent. They were true Universalists at heart. Roy considered “different religions as national embodiments of one universal theism,”¹⁰² and Syed Ahmed Khan suggested that “all prophets had the same *din*.”¹⁰³ “The idea of India,” said Tagore, “itself militates against the intense consciousness of the separateness of one’s own people from others.”¹⁰⁴ The yogi Ramakrishna apparently practiced all

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 34.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Ibid., 40.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Sen, *The Argumentative Indian*, 72.

religions¹⁰⁵ and likened them to water, which assumes the shape of the vessel it is poured into. Vivekananda refused to believe that religions were contradictory or antagonistic. “There never was my religion or yours, my national religion or your national religion, there never existed many national religions, there is only one . . . We must respect all religions.”¹⁰⁶

Secularism in India

Communalism Rises

Religious universalism may be seen as the earliest forms of solidarity expressed by Indians in the face of colonialism.¹⁰⁷ But this was in tandem to the defense of religious tradition, also necessary against the cultural hegemony of the colonials, and was ultimately responsible for the rise of communalism. Communalism, or religious particularism, emphasizes the superiority of one’s own religion over others. Its growth was a serious blow to the development of secularism in India. Many a great intellectual braced the connivance against secularism with the moral authority of their persons. Despite all his universalist exhortations, Vivekananda, who had studied at the knee of Ramakrishna, could hold out no longer and at last declared Hinduism to be the only true religion.¹⁰⁸

Political religious communalism began to make space for itself in the consciousness of the peoples of India. The solidarity of communities was fractured by internal movements as in the case of the *Brahmo Samaj* and the *Arya Samaj* among the Hindus and the *Wahhabis* and the

¹⁰⁵ Panikkar, *Colonialism, Culture, Resistance*, 40.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 41.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

Faraizis among the Muslims.¹⁰⁹ In the twentieth-century, the Simla Deputation, the provision of separate electorates, the Lucknow Pact, and the Khilafat agitation are all evidence of that emergent trend.¹¹⁰ Avowedly secular leaders started to take on a community-based outlook. Even Gandhi, the much vaunted champion of Hindu-Muslim unity, took a communitarian view in the aftermath of the Malabar Rebellion of 1921, when he held the Muslims collectively responsible for what the Mappilas had done.¹¹¹ It was for the Muslims to alone to ensure that Mappila ‘fanaticism’ would not erupt again.¹¹²

Fanatic Hindu nationalism soon found a champion in Vinayak ‘Veer’ Savarkar. Savarkar was the first to use the word ‘Hindutva’ in 1923, as a means to distinguish Hindu and Muslim nations. He had thus managed to partition the country on ideological lines a good fifteen years before Jinnah latched onto the idea to create Pakistan.¹¹³ Interestingly, during the freedom movement, the religiosity of political leaders and their beliefs in a secular identity stood in ironic contrast. Jinnah, the praised defender of the Muslim cause, was not a devout man, while Abul Kalam Azad, President of the Indian National Congress, was deeply religious.¹¹⁴

Modern Hindutva activists seem to have forgotten the tolerant parts of their faith in their attempts to impose a crude dogma on others.¹¹⁵ India has historically been a safe haven for refugees escaping religious persecution, often heavily discriminated groups like Jews, Parsis and

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 101.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 47.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹¹² *Ibid.*

¹¹³ Sen, *The Argumentative Indian*, 51.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 307.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 47.

Christians. That the greater part of Muslims chose to remain in India than immigrate to Pakistan also shows the inclusive identity to which they aspired.¹¹⁶

Indian Secularism

In hindsight, the development of secularism in India is different from how it developed in Europe or more specifically how the French model came about. The French interpretation strictly prohibits the public display of religious symbols. The Indian interpretation on the other hand focuses on maintaining neutrality between the admixture of religions that make up Indian society.¹¹⁷ French secularism is prohibitory, as seen in bans on Muslim headscarves and *burkinis*. The Indian is neutral and more ‘peaceful.’¹¹⁸ Indian secularism pursues symmetry between religions in a way that favours no religion in particular.¹¹⁹

To recap, two important legacies have been left behind that emerged from the rationalist and humanist ideas of colonial India. First was a struggle to create a social and religious system regulated by reason.¹²⁰ Second was to emphasize material existence instead of otherworldliness.¹²¹ These ideas did not grow properly given the social order that colonialism constructed which severely hampered their growth. What is more, they had to be partially abandoned when the nationalist consciousness awoke to fight the cultural oppression and hegemony of colonialism.¹²²

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 51.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 19.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 20.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 303.

¹²⁰ Sen, *Colonialism, Culture, Resistance*, 39.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*

¹²² *Ibid.*

Failed Secularism in India

Looking back, we see that historically, neither respect for all religions nor the unity of the godhead could sustain secularism in India.¹²³ Although India has had a long tradition of public reasoning and open debates, discussed in much detail in the previous chapter, these debates rarely ever embraced social issues.¹²⁴ That was because the social turmoil as a result of technological revolutions in pre-colonial times had not hit India as hard as it would in the colonial period.¹²⁵ Therefore, the reach of these discussions remained limited.

It is important to note here that the separation of church and state, the hallmark of a secular country, is merely the political dimension of a process that began in Europe with the Protestant Reformation. This does not encompass the social and cultural implications of secularism. To achieve a secular society, a state needs to shed religious partisanship. Even implied support of one religion over others by the state is the end of secularism, as it is here in Pakistan. Yet, although the state in India does not ally itself with one particular religion, it does not crucially dissociate itself from religion either.¹²⁶ And that is the chief weakness of the Indian brand of secularism: by keeping religion in play, religiosity is enhanced; religious identities are projected and preserved and consequently, social distance between religious communities increases.¹²⁷ Neutrality then becomes just an embellished aura when even obscurantist customs are held

¹²³ *Ibid.*, 41.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 134.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 41.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*

sacrosanct and maintained. In this situation, the state is just one step shy from going completely religious if a political crisis demands such.¹²⁸

Secularism Today

Today, the only foundation on which secularism can really rest in India is an all-out frontal confrontation with religion. But then again we must be wary of Marx's pronouncement that "those of us who declare war on religion . . . do but strengthen the enemy."¹²⁹

But secularism has won a reprieve in Indian society today. 'Intellectual simplifiers' like Samuel P. Huntington labelled India a Hindu civilization in *Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*; yet India is a secular country with a majority Hindu population. It is not a theocratic state, much like the United States is not a Christian theocratic country, even though the Declaration of Independence was signed by Christians.¹³⁰ The framers of the Indian Constitution gave appropriate recognition to India's plural past and steered clear from a definition of 'Indianness' as derived from any one religion or group. Huntington's statement that the "West was West long before it was modern" and that the "sense of individualism and a tradition of individual rights and liberties to be found in the West are unique among civilized societies" are full of assumption.¹³¹ In short, the cultural and religious past of India should be a celebration of variety and plurality despite tendencies to negate them.

¹²⁸ Ibid., 42.

¹²⁹ Ibid.

¹³⁰ Sen, *The Argumentative Indian*, 54.

¹³¹ Ibid., 76.

Chapter IV: Economy and Industry

Introduction

In this chapter we explore the development of capitalism and industrial modernity in India. Historians of economic systems, particularly Marxist historians, opine that new social and economic orders arise from the internal contradictions of previous phases. They accept the unilinear succession of slavery—feudalism—capitalism as the yardstick to measure social and economic progress in world societies.¹ By this definition, since true capitalism developed only in Europe, only Europe had reached the apex of social and economic evolution and the societies that inhabited the large swathes of the Indian subcontinent remained living relics of a bygone age.

A cursory look at societies around the world tells a very different tale from such oriental tales as we would be made to believe. All societies do not follow a unilinear path. For example, China in the 1200s was socially and technologically well-advanced when Europe was a dank and muddy backwater undeveloped in the ways of capitalism.²

Another key yardstick of progress and modernity in pre-modern societies has been to measure the proximity or distance from capitalistic tendencies in said societies. The sagacity of this notion is also questionable. Societies even without developing a machine industry, like England did in the Industrial Revolution, may still evolve a robust money economy.

¹ Irfan Habib, *Essays in Indian History: Towards a Marxist Perception* (New Delhi: Tulika, 1995), 6.

² *Ibid.*

Capitalism and Colonialism

One of the more fundamental questions that economic historians ask is whether Indian society would have developed capitalism and industry on the lines of Europe had colonialism not interfered with its trajectory of development. The answer is a curt ‘no.’ Indian society was too weak to have developed in the capitalist direction without the external stimulus provided by British imperialism. A society drenched in superstitious practices, a climate of pestilence and heat, and constant ravaging wars are not conditions ideal enough for subsistence economy to germinate. It was impossible for the British overlords to lift the Indian economy from such a quagmire and it was remarkable that they were able to accomplish what they did. Of course, the critics of this view suggest that primitive Indian economy was not as bad as the imperialists make it out to be. Besides, Indian society may not have sprouted capitalism even if colonialism had not interfered³ because the single most contributory element to the development of capitalism, overseas colonial plunder, was absent.

However, the historical development of certain societies towards industrialization also challenges the notions that plunder leads to capitalism. Portugal and Spain, great colonial empires in their own right, acquired vast fortunes in plunder but did not industrialize. Russia also had lots of plunder but developed very little industry. Germany on the other hand had missed out on the dash for an overseas empire and had no access to plunder but industrialized rapidly.

Ancient Indian Economy

³ *ibid.*

Village Community

Hegel is well-known for having said that “the Hindoos have no history”⁴ and that “the people of India have achieved no foreign conquests, but have on every occasion been vanquished themselves.”⁵ Karl Marx also expressed something similar when he said that “Indian society has no history, at least no known history. What we call its history is but the history of the successive intruders who founded their empires on the passive basis of that unresisting and unchanging society.”⁶ But Marx, delving deeper than Hegel soon realized that the religious foundation of Indian society was in fact a socio-economic organization based on the village community.⁷

What was the village community? By all accounts it was a petty community that was at once producing, self-sustaining and with fixed stratified occupations.⁸ Such a ‘stagnatory, vegetative’ community lacked a division of labor and in which agricultural and manufacturing pursuits were united while at the same time it possessed an ‘unalterable division of labor’ in the form of the caste system which prevented change.⁹ Marx would later change his earlier opinion of the stagnant nature of the village community when he realized that private property did in fact emerge there in all the glory of its internal contradictions.¹⁰

Medieval Indian Economy

⁴ Ibid., 16.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid., 19.

⁸ Ibid., 21.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid., 32.

Pre-Colonial Indian economy was feudatory and despotic but not slave-based.¹¹ One of the best expositions of the pre-colonial economy of India is observable in two articles Marx contributed to the *New York Daily Tribune* in which he extrapolates the mechanics of the economy of Indian society before the colonial experience.

No Private Property

Francois Bernier's assessment of Mughal society may have been accurate when he observed that Mughal power had decayed because of a lack of private ownership of property since all property belonged to the emperor who 'leased' it to whom he pleased.¹² This phenomenon was uniquely Eastern and gave rise to the idea of the 'oriental despot' who was first and foremost a rent-seeking sovereign.¹³ Indian writers did not share this view, however, because the reigning potentate rarely ever expropriated productive tenets and would even make spectacles of buying land from some subjects.¹⁴

East and West

Medieval Indian economy resembled its European counterpart in a number of ways. The reason they developed along separate paths was because the market for Indian handicrafts remained directed at the aristocratic and royal elite while in Europe a shift was seen toward the middle

¹¹ Ibid., 5.

¹² Ibid., 23.

¹³ Ibid., 24.

¹⁴ Ibid., 93.

classes.¹⁵ Also, huge bureaucracies that converted tax into rent did not develop in Europe as they did in India. This was perhaps because the huge state-controlled works of artificial irrigation in India could only be taken up by a centralized state, given the massive scale they had to occur on.¹⁶

The per capita agricultural productivity of Mughal India, when compared with contemporary societies in Europe, was not at all backward but at par with them.¹⁷ Evidence of the enormous amounts of surplus in northern India is in the number of massive temples that dotted the landscape.¹⁸ This goes to prove that the lack of capitalistic development in India cannot be because there was no agricultural surplus but for reasons entirely different.¹⁹

What Causes Capitalism?

What then causes capitalism to spring up from older societies? Perhaps the mode of appropriation of agricultural surplus and its distribution generates such economic tendencies to develop?²⁰ In Mughal India, agricultural surplus was appropriated through a demand on the producer imposed by the royalty who acquired it in the form of tax-rent and peasant labor.²¹ Together with artisans who serviced the peasantry, this formed a self-sufficient village

¹⁵ Ibid., 29.

¹⁶ Ibid., 29.

¹⁷ Ibid., 184.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid., 185.

community and a stable economic unit.²² Capitalistic elements can hardly arise from the insides of such a self-sufficient and reliant system.²³

Mughal Bureaucracy

In the Mughal bureaucracy, the constant transferring of *jagirs* and the impermanence and non-hereditary character of the office meant that officeholders did not have a long-term interest in growing their land-assignments. After many years of service at one place, the desultory noble would be transferred to another 'assignment' upon on the whims of the monarch. And as his officialdom came to a close, he could not pass down headship of the land and its revenues to his sons. All this was done to check the nobles from building a power base independent of the monarch.²⁴ But there was a blow back. Officeholders would horde as much wealth as possible whilst tenure of their assignments lasted, thus adding excessive pressure on the peasantry, and in effect draining it of revenue and future growth potential, all for an immediate gain.²⁵ The slow, cumbersome Mughal bureaucracy lacked any corrective measures to sway from this fatal course and the system hurtled along in this manner down the centuries.²⁶

Mughal Economy

²² Ibid., 186.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid., 189.

²⁵ Ibid., 189.

²⁶ Ibid.

Besides agriculture, the other means of surplus in medieval India was through horticulture. In Mughal India, the laying out of orchards was an avid practice of nearly all the nobles and royalty.²⁷ The superior classes also cultivated some land themselves, a practice called *khwud-kasht* which was a source of employment for large numbers of landless labourers.²⁸ Although slavery did exist, it was almost always limited and largely domestic because landless labourers came cheap and the superior classes payed them enough to afford meagre dollops of sustenance to survive.²⁹ These landless masses formed a menial class of rural semi-proletariats, whose ranks would swell from time to time by peasants who abandoned their cultivator's way of life when they defaulted on revenues owed to the state.³⁰

The increasing pressure upon the peasants did not lead to semi-capitalism but instead to a political crisis of agrarian uprisings which collapsed the Mughal Empire and the social and economic aspects it had sustained.³¹ This is similar to what happened in China where a series of successive agrarian crises ended a centuries-old empire; neither terminated in the rise of a capitalist-inspired economic order.³²

Mughal Industry

Mughal economy was quite industrious for its time. It was urbanized and continued to expand. The per-head output of the Mughal population working in industrial crafts in the seventeenth and eighteenth-century was comparable to output produced in the early industrial twentieth-

²⁷ Ibid., 196.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid., 197.

³⁰ Ibid., 198.

³¹ Ibid., 200.

³² Ibid.

century!³³ This was achieved through an evolution in the efficiency and increasing sophistication of tools of industry. However, what struck most European travelers at the time, including Bernier, was the apparent primitive nature of the tools. Tools in medieval India were only meant to ‘improve human dexterity’, not be of a sufficient quality to make human labour useless.

Bernier called the Delhi of his times ‘destitute of tools.’³⁴ This naturally led Europeans to conclude that since the tools that Indian craftsmen employed were simple and crude, their industrial products must also be wanting in complexity (and the artisans in skill). These conclusions were hastily reached despite ample evidence of the Indians’ vast array of high-quality products abounding all over. In Agra, it was claimed that “for a job which one man would do in Holland, here passes through four men’s hands before it is finished.”³⁵ These kindled a belief that Indian craftsmen were merely adept imitators of European products but were not prodigious or skilled enough to come up with original ideas, and that complicated works, such as precision instruments like the clock, were not even attempted given the complexity and technical skill needed in their manufacture.³⁶ Indian economy thus was labour intensive as opposed to capital intensive.

The lack of mining was seen as another deficiency of the medieval Indian industrial-scape. Iron was only collected through surface excavations, cutting only into the sides of hills, despite the wonder the Salt Mines excited from foreign observers.³⁷ Although as the ‘Persian’ and ‘spinning’ wheels demonstrate that cheaper materials may be used in the place of iron, and that massive

³³ Ibid., 213.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid., 214.

irrigation projects and a vast cottage industry of cotton can be established using them, iron is still necessary for greater technological breakthroughs.³⁸

There was some equivalence in the iron works of East and West. A cursory look at the manufacture of artillery, considered to be the ‘heavy industry’ of medieval times especially during the early gunpowder age, gives a clear idea of the technological parity between the medieval strength ratios of the European powers and Mughal India. The Indian heavy gun, unlike the European which was cast in molds, was made of bands of thinned out metal bars hooped and fused together.³⁹ The quality did not completely match that of the European guns but Bernier still had praise for the products, especially Indian muskets.⁴⁰

Workers in India were not organized into manufactories. Large works such as the building of mausoleums or architecture provided the impetus to bring together teeming numbers of workers but did not survive completion of the projects.⁴¹ The same was the case for shipbuilding.⁴² There were no dedicated shipyards and the workers did not survive as a coherent clique once construction was over and the ship was set to sail.⁴³

Productive assembly of workers is the *sine qua non* of capitalism if it is to thrive. It is paramount that a large number of workers, artisans, craftsmen and other skilled workers assemble in large organizations. Of course, organizations such as these were not completely absent in India. Tavernier writes of almost three hundred workers assigned to plots of land to mine for diamonds

³⁸ Ibid., 215.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid., 220.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid., 221.

and saltpeter⁴⁴ and identified the Indian equivalent to the manufactory, the *karkhana*, which converted previously free artisans to wage labourers.⁴⁵ But these *karkhanas* only produced luxury items for noble and royal consumption unlike their counterparts in Europe.⁴⁶ Perhaps the real reason manufactories along the European model did not develop in India was because of the efficient exploitation of the labour of workers by the superior classes. Since the labour of the artisan also included that of his wife and children, at no extra cost to the employer, this discouraged proper manufactories from being established.⁴⁷ Thus Mughal India retained an extensive commodity production without showing much trace of the emergence of industrial capital.⁴⁸

Caste and Industry

In India, there was no barrier to innovation and technological advance. Caste was no such barrier and it is often falsely believed that caste created tight specializations with no skill passing between them.⁴⁹ This theory has currently come under fire. Castes were not completely immobile and economic exploitation forced members to move into others castes over time. They were not an insurmountable obstacle to economic development in medieval India. The greatest impediment to the supply of free labour, on the other hand, seems to have been the medieval nobles' practice of extortion of forced labour from the artisans.⁵⁰

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 222.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 223.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 215.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 218.

Mughal Trade

Trade during the Mughal era was a lucrative prospect. Surat merchants at the time of Bernier were legendarily rich. One of these, Virji Vora, possessed a total wealth of eight million rupees. Abdul Ghafoor, another merchant, had twenty ships of between 300 and 800 tons each and alone conducted trade equaling that of the entire East India Company.⁵¹ European merchants and factors in the seventeenth-century made no serious criticism of the credit system used in India which was not too unfavorably compared to the system employed in Europe.⁵² However, international trade in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries also had a crushing impact on the Indian economy, especially after the Americas were discovered and Spanish conquistadors began to send back a preponderant fortune in gold and precious stones.⁵³

Late Medieval-Era Observers

During the early nineteenth-century, several Indians visited Europe and recorded their experience of the West. Some of them travelled there to gain political concessions from the Directors of the Company, while others came to satisfy their natural inquisitiveness about a different world. They came from an India under full colonial rule and wrote about a Britain that was very different to that of their predecessors who visited in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

⁵¹ Ibid., 225.

⁵² Ibid., 227.

⁵³ Ibid., 229.

Britain was now far more industrialized. The world's first machine civilization had been born. In industrial and technological advancement, one of these observers called Yusuf discerned the cause of English prosperity and the underlying reasons for their success over less energetic peoples. Having visited the Woolwich Arsenal where he especially noticed the mechanization in the production processes he concluded: "People who were endowed with such skill and aptitude and remained preoccupied with these activities, why should they not become rulers of the Seven Climes. To challenge them is like fighting against the *genii*."

Colonial Era

Merchant-Capitalists

The East India Company which gained power in Bengal was ruled by merchant-capitalists of London. They had thus far conducted a trade based on the import of Indian piecegoods, silk, indigo and spices that was financed mainly by the export of treasure. Now, suddenly, they found in their conquests the ultimate bliss that every merchant dreams of: to be able to buy but without having to pay, and yet, be able to sell at the full price.⁵⁴ This pernicious goal could be achieved by treating the entire revenues of the country as gross profits. From these the expenses necessary for maintaining government and army, and law and order – the costs of maintenance of the existing system of exploitation – had to be deducted in order to yield the net profits. These could, in turn, be invested for the purchase of Indian commodities, the so-called 'investments.'⁵⁵

⁵⁴ Ibid., 299.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 300.

The source of the conquerors' profits lay not in commerce but in land revenue. Maximization of land revenue was necessary for maximization in profits. It was this that led to the inimical pressure upon the *zamindars* in Bengal and to the system of temporary revenue farms auctioned to the highest bidders. The actual collection of revenue from the '*diwan* lands' in Bengal was pushed from Rs 64.3 lakh in 1762-63, under the *Nizamat*, to Rs 147.0 lakh in 1765-66, the first year of Company *diwani*.⁵⁶ Such was the pressure that the famine in Bengal occurring in 1769-70 carried off a third of the cultivators of the province that is Bengal, but caused no decline in revenue assessments!⁵⁷

Permanent Settlement

The Permanent Settlement was proclaimed in 1793 by Lord Charles Cornwallis.⁵⁸ Whatever the intellectual origins of the Permanent Settlement, and however profusely the word 'proprietor' might be used for the *zamindar* by Cornwallis, it did not convert him into a real landlord.⁵⁹ The bulk of the surplus went to the Company. The share of the *zamindar*, to begin with, was fixed at only an eleventh part of the land revenue and he was cast in a role little more than that of a hereditary revenue farmer with fixed leases.⁶⁰

Very soon a different view became dominant: that neither the *zamindars* nor the peasants deserved to be proprietors. The proponents of this new doctrine were the Utilitarians, fired by the

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 301.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 302.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

writings of James Mill, that ideological spokesman of triumphant capitalism.⁶¹ The directors of the Company had already become dissatisfied with the Permanent Settlement even before Mill had uttered a word on the subject.⁶²

Marx and the Colonials

Karl Marx reserved his severest opprobrium for British free traders mainly because during the process of conquest and annexation of Indian territories, they had chosen to remain quiet, but had later become obnoxiously loud “with their hypocritical peace cant.”⁶³ “Firstly, they had to get it [India] in order to subject it to their sharp philanthropy.”⁶⁴ To Marx, it was the British workers who were more exploited by greedy colonialism than the Indian workers because of the export of surplus value to India from Britain, even though such exports also caused massive unemployment in India.⁶⁵

Marx lamented the tributary status India had acquired under British colonialism. “During the whole course of the eighteenth century the treasures transported from India to England were gained much less by comparatively insignificant commerce than by the direct exploitation of that country, and by the colossal fortunes there extorted and transmitted to England.”⁶⁶ Part of the wealth gained in revenues was from the ‘agrarian revolutions’ that the British instigated, introducing the idea of private property and the like. *Zamindari* and *ryotwari* settlements’ main

⁶¹ Ibid., 307.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid., 8.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 9.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 36.

function was to increase government taxes,⁶⁷ although we must admit that the creation of landed gentry, especially in Bengal, did in fact adversely affect the interests of the government.⁶⁸

Drain of Wealth

By the eighteenth-century, the East India Company had in all aspects replaced the indigenous sovereign's right to tax-rent. The amount spent on infrastructure stood in pale contrast to the plunder. A mere 0.17 million pounds were spent on 'roads, canals, bridges and other works of public necessity' from revenues exceeding 19.8 million pounds from 1851-52.⁶⁹ Karl Marx, Edmund Burke, Sir John Shore, James Mill, Montgomery Martin and Lord Cornwallis all spoke of the drain of wealth from India.⁷⁰ "What the English take from them [the people of India] annually," said Marx, "in the form of rent, dividends for railways useless to the Hindus; pensions for military and civil servicemen, for Afghanistan and other wars . . . amounts to more than the total sum of income of 60 million of agricultural and industrial laborers of India! This is a bleeding process with a vengeance!"⁷¹

"The fact that India had to have a rate of saving of 4 percent of her national income just to pay the tribute must be borne in mind when economists speak of the lack of internal capacities for development, or the low per capita income base, from which the British could not lift the

⁶⁷ Ibid., 38.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 36.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 37.

⁷¹ Ibid., 43.

Indians, however much they tried.”⁷² Even in the famines of the 1890s, India was forced to export 2 to 3 million tons of wheat every year while natives perished in millions.⁷³

Opium Trade

As time went by, India could no longer pay its tribute by revenue to the colonial masters. This tribute had previously been gained from the revenue of exports but Indian craft products had now lost their place in the international market. The solution was found in the growth of opium in India and its imposition on and export to the Chinese. The trade was also important to India. Opium exports to China made a full one seventh of the income of the British government of India. The East India Company monopolized opium cultivation in India and forced it on the once proudly mandarin Chinese through smuggling and war.⁷⁴

Opium export to China soon dwarfed all other exports. Its value rose from \$3.66 to \$12.90 million and became the premier export of British India.⁷⁵ British profits increased exponentially as larger and larger segments of the China were introduced to the wonders of the poppy world. The beauty of the arrangement was that China would in return furnish tea and silk and thus the tribute would be realized in an enlarged form.⁷⁶ Dominance over China soon became indispensable for the full exploitation of India.

Bones of the Weavers

⁷² Ibid., 280.

⁷³ Ibid., 281.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 40.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 324.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 325.

All this kept pace with the complete destruction of the handicraft industry in India. Ironically, the more free trade doctrines triumphed in British politics, the more relentless did British expansion become.⁷⁷ Engels complained of how India was conquered with the hopes of increasing the imports of materials from India to the mother country but ended up becoming the primary consumer of British manufactured stuffs. To him 1800 was the year that separated the ‘import’ phase from the ‘export’ phase.⁷⁸ How tragic indeed that India, “the great workshop of cotton manufacture for the world, since immemorial times, became now inundated with English twists and cotton stuffs.”⁷⁹ From 1813-35, British cloth manufactures were only 3.9 percent of Indian consumption, but by 1880, this had jumped to 58.4 percent.⁸⁰ Lancashire cloth ended the millennia old occupation of village weavers and spinners in a matter of decades. The earlier natural economy collapsed, and so it came to pass that “the bones of the cotton-weavers were bleaching the plains of India.”⁸¹

Marx was always drawn to the plight of the Indian weavers, “ruined by Manchester and Free Trade”⁸² and of the “millions of workers who had to perish in the East Indies [India] so as to produce for the million and a half workers employed in England in the same [textile] industry, three years’ prosperity out of ten.”⁸³ He did lament the *fait accompli*, that “sea of woes” to which the hapless Indian population had been subjected whilst “losing at the same time their ancient form of civilization and their hereditary means of subsistence.”⁸⁴

⁷⁷ Ibid., 44.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 45.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 46.

⁸¹ Ibid., 47.

⁸² Ibid., 49.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 50.

Regeneration

However, the old system of superstitious stagnant societies which “restrained the mind within the smallest possible compass” needed to go to usher in a change and a brighter future. To Marx, the coming of the British, however exploitative and morally reprehensible, was a necessary evil so that Indian society could crawl out from the dredges of the past into the light of the present. And the drain of wealth from India was the necessary prerequisite for the genesis of industrial capitalism of the form it took in England in the nineteenth-century.

But when the Mutiny of 1857 broke out, Marx found himself cheering for the rebels instead.⁸⁵ To him it was ‘not a military mutiny, but a national revolt’ and echoed Ahmed Khan’s own judgement when he said that the isolation of the British and a complete lack of mutual trust between them and the peasantry was the at the root of its outbreak.⁸⁶ Marx was equally skeptical of government accounts of the atrocities committed by the mutineers. Although his heart sided with the rebels, he was rational enough to realize that the rebellion was an attempt to reestablish the old dead ways. This he was against. When it was finally put down, he turned his attention to what he called the “dual role” that the British had in their mission in India.

The first was the complete destruction of the old order, which would only be complete when governance of the colony passed from the Company into the hands of the Crown. The second was the attempt to replicate the material foundations of a western society in Asia.⁸⁷ Under British patronage, India was unified politically by the railway and the telegraph; a disciplined and well-armed native military was established; free press flourished; private property was introduced;

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 51.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 53.

schools were built which imparted a modern, scientific education that supplanted centuries-old myth and superstition. All these were the “prerequisites for the creation of an Indian bourgeoisie” which would nurture Indian capitalism.⁸⁸

Marx was a believer in the Indian capacity to found a modern society and did not agree with the Anglicists Wood, Elphinstone and Munro’s assessment of them.⁸⁹ Indians, having the capitalist strain, and once industrialized, would rid their society of caste prejudices and other social ills. “The modern industry, resulting from the railway system, will dissolve the hereditary divisions of labor upon which rest the Indian castes, those decisive impediments to Indian progress and Indian power.”⁹⁰

It was during the second half of the nineteenth-century that the modern Indian landlord was created and an alliance formed simultaneously between him and imperialism.⁹¹ Yet such were the factors inherent in this phase of imperialism that it also gave birth to two new classes in Indian society, the bourgeoisie and the industrial proletariat.⁹² This was a prospect that Marx had seen when contemplating the projected construction of railways in India.⁹³

In the end however, the regenerative processes ended up creating internal contradictions in Indian society. The nascent bourgeoisie had an outlook in stark contrast to that espoused by the East India Company,⁹⁴ conditions which continued unattended even after the failed mutiny. Bourgeois-led agitation sparked the formation of the Indian National Congress by A. O. Hume in 1885.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 54.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 55.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 56.

⁹¹ Ibid., 334.

⁹² Ibid., 334.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 56.

The Death of Capitalism in India

Capitalism as it sprang up in Britain expanded the production sector. In India, capitalist production was not enhanced but pre-capitalist forms of accumulation, rent extraction and usury, were strengthened,⁹⁵ with only the small exception of tea plantations.⁹⁶ Primitive accumulation is where capitalism begins and so much had been accomplished in Europe, unlike the state of affairs in the colonies. Colonies such as India, as we have seen, remained important means of transforming wealth from non-capitalist worlds to capitalist ones through the drain of wealth.⁹⁷

Thus, true capitalist development under the colonial aegis was not encouraged. “While it created a proletariat by destroying Indian crafts, it did not correspondingly generate capital that could give it even partial employment.”⁹⁸ Colonialism, ironically, first created the objective situation for the growth of capitalism by providing a modern education and transport facility, but turned around and stifled this progress by extracting heavy tribute, and imposing free trade.⁹⁹

During the Industrial Revolution in England, India was coughing up almost 30 percent of the total national saving transformed into capital.¹⁰⁰ This factor of development of capitalism in England should not be ignored. By 1800, the machine had conquered the cotton textile industry and within thirty years was going to conquer other sectors as well.¹⁰¹ This conquest of the machine extended to the railway, the most important aspect of British economy during the 1830s

⁹⁵ Ibid., 289.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 273.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 289.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 294.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 306.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

and 1840s. One of the chief effects of the railway was that it enhanced the way the colonizing power, Britain, accumulated primitive capital. British capital built railways but was guaranteed a minimum return, costing the Indian taxpayer Rs. 568 million between 1849 and 1900.¹⁰²

Colonial ideologues and their modern reincarnations tell us that the colonial regime was in essence ‘a continuation of prior indigenous regimes of the subcontinent.’¹⁰³ The veracity of the view that “colonial society in India was the creation of the colonial state” is also slowly being questioned.¹⁰⁴ What this point of view is getting at is that colonial India was a natural culmination of the contradictions that existed in pre-colonial India or that the Spanish colonial experience was rooted in the contradictions of Aztec and Inca societies before the conquistadors arrived.¹⁰⁵ This blatantly ignores the fact that although colonialism laid the groundwork for capitalism to emerge, colonial instruments of power were the very ones used to quash the seeds of capitalism in the colonies whenever they tried to germinate and ended up suppressing or severely retarding the growth of capitalism. This is not ‘continuation,’ this is ‘contradiction,’ a seething barefaced contradiction between colonialism and national liberation.¹⁰⁶

Deindustrialization

By 1828, the number of British hardware exports to the Indian market alongside cotton goods had increased exponentially so that the craft industry in India slumped badly.¹⁰⁷ This caused massive deindustrialization in India and an urban decline. These two aspects of East India

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 279.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 271.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 272.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 322.

Company domination spread wherever the Company sovereignty extended.¹⁰⁸ Imperialism's two-pronged assault, the extraction of tribute and seizure of native markets, proceeded in tandem but the deindustrialization of India sharply decreased tribute extraction, which had mostly been in the form of export of Indian-made goods.¹⁰⁹ Britain had obtained 'wealth and capital', and India 'prosperity, industry, population and revenue' but as revenue gained from Indian exports declined, "the happy days of mutual convenience were over."¹¹⁰

By the middle of the nineteenth-century, the machine had completed its conquest of industry in Britain and a basic network of railways, the greatest absorbent of capital, was realized. Once this point had passed, the export of capital began in earnest.¹¹¹ By the 1880s, the process of deindustrialization had been more or less completed.¹¹²

Subdued By Rail

The railways enabled Britain to carry her conquest of the Indian market to its maximum extent.¹¹³ In 1871 the railway mileage was more than 5,000 miles in India which came close to 1881 and by 1895 was 19,555 miles.¹¹⁴ The poorest country in the world now rivalled the richest in railway mileage!

This was no cause for celebration. In America and the European countries, railway catalyzed industrial revolution whereas colonial conquest was the purpose it served in India. And the

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 323.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 326.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 329.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 327.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 328.

capital that went into the laying of railways adversely inhibited investment in other areas of the economy.¹¹⁵ Apart from plantations and the jute industry no other branch of the Indian economy could attract British capital with any expectation of high returns as the railway industry did.¹¹⁶

Commercialization and Usury

Indian agriculture was shifted to produce raw material for England through a process called ‘commercialization.’¹¹⁷ This caused a decline in the quantity of food available, and the decline was directly proportional to the speed of railway expansion.¹¹⁸ Proponents of the railway had argued that railways would help lift the scourge of famine by but the very opposite had happened!

Usury subverted small peasant cultivation and encouraged landlordism. It often suited the British administration to proclaim ‘rural indebtedness’ as the source of all evil that befell the peasant. But the phenomenal growth of usury was an inseparable aspect of the transformation of the Indian agrarian economy brought about by colonialism itself.¹¹⁹

Today, third world capitalism is “a gross caricature of European capitalism, reproducing and intensifying its worst features without holding out the promise of a better tomorrow.”¹²⁰

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 329.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 320.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 334.

¹²⁰ Baber, *The Science of Empire*, 254.

Chapter V: Science

Introduction

Modernity as it developed in the West in the wake of the Renaissance and the Enlightenment composed three interconnected elements namely the humanistic, universalistic and scientific. The scientific revolution that came about in Europe may not have happened in the absence of the Reformation. Indeed, the Reformation that Martin Luther brought about was a catalyst for the scientific mode of thinking that would become the hallmark of the European mind right up until the present day. The reason for the Reformation's importance was its introduction of a traditional and somewhat magical society to the idea that the hegemony of the Church could be challenged.

The Protestant idea, of the vernacularization and self-interpretation of the Bible, hitherto the domain of a strict, hallowed clique who spoke in dead languages, was not a far cry from the idea that the universe could be understood through experimentation and reason. This understanding produced modern science in Europe, separate from what passed for science in most parts of the world before that period. Westerners understood that religion was mere opinion and actual empirical knowledge was the forte of science. Tradition was thus relegated to opinion. What is important to understand is that this definition of modernity, that is that the modern is separate and distinct from the traditional, did not catch on in other parts of the world, specifically in India. There were early scientific advances for sure, as we shall see in the chapter ahead, but the idea that tradition is merely opinion and science is knowledge did not occur, or if it did, in the wake of British colonialism, it was mongrelized and diluted.

‘Hindu science’ or ‘Indian science’ is in the end just as much a misnomer ultimately as ‘Western science’ is, which was incidentally hugely dependent on Arab and Chinese advances made prior to the Renaissance, Enlightenment or Industrial Revolution. Vast trade networks introduced the wider world to Indian philosophy, whose ‘void’ invented the symbol for *sunya* or zero.¹

Science in Ancient India

The ancient Indians made critical advances in a number of scientific disciplines. Indian tradition and culture is seen as considerably religious and overwhelmingly anti-scientific which is a gross misreading into India’s scientific past. Scientific advance is intricately connected with heterodoxy, a trait clearly observable in the flowering of Indian science in the persons of Aryabhata, Varahamihira, and Brahmagupta.

Of course, we must be wary of the exaggerated claims of a number of Hindu nationalist views of the accomplishments of the ancient Indians, whose main motivation was not academic but political. Just to be clear, it is now proven beyond the shadow of a doubt that none could fight battles in the air!² The Hindutva movement, in denying the influences of ancient Babylonian, Greek and Roman influences on early Indian astronomy and mathematics, boasted an artificial indigenous self-sufficiency.³

Indus Valley Civilization

¹ Baber, *The Science of Empire*, 36.

² *Ibid.*, 18.

³ *Ibid.*, 28.

The Indus Valley Civilization was highly developed at a time when the largest social and political unit in the rest of the world was the city-state. This advancement was possible because of the agricultural surplus and the growth of technology (a phenomenon called incipient urbanism by archeologists) characterized by wide roads and straight lanes. This was indicative of a high degree of urban planning.⁴ The laying of roads at right angles would have been impossible without significant advances in rudimentary geometry.⁵

Proto-scientific thinking in India was largely concerned with social especially religious implications. The *Sulbasutras*, an appendix to the *Vedas*, laid down rules for the construction of sacrificial altars.⁶ The heavens were scanned and the movement of the celestial bodies charted so that religious rites could be performed at auspicious times. With the eventual loss of interest in Vedic sacrifice, geometric and mathematical calculations too came to an end.⁷

Post-Vedic Period

The phase of Siddhantic astronomy with its “flights of fancy,” sometime 400 AD, was signaled out by James Mill for particular ridicule.⁸ This was incidentally also the time the Indians developed ‘trigonometry as we know it.’⁹ One of the best known Indian astronomers of this period, Aryabhata, first articulated the theory of the earth’s rotation on its axis¹⁰ which was

⁴ *Ibid.*, 20.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 24.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 26.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 30.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 30.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 31.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 32.

shunned by later scholars.¹¹ Brahmagupta, born in 598 AD, led the search for a *perpetuum mobile* or ‘perpetual motion machine,’ which in turn influenced Bhaskara II, whose ideas in turn, had a profound impact on European innovation.¹² The transmission of Bhaskara II’s ideas, via the agency of the Arabs, introduced power technology to the Europeans.¹³ “Without such a fantasy, such soaring imagination, the power technology of the western world would not have developed.”¹⁴

The most impressive evidence of ancient Indian expertise in metallurgy was the construction of a giant pillar of iron at Delhi and the colossal statue of the Buddha at Sultanganj, the construction of which would have been impossible even during mid-eighteenth century industrial Europe!¹⁵

Alberuni, the famed Iranian astronomer, praised Aryabhata’s work on the diurnal motion of the earth which challenged the notion of an orbiting sun;¹⁶ on presenting for the first time the idea of a force of gravity;¹⁷ and his courage, a feat of character absent in the Indian astronomer’s disciples like Brahmagupta, who ended up criticizing his master, kowtowing in front of religious orthodoxy, and blaming him of apostasy, all the while imitating his scientific methods.¹⁸

Ancient Ayurveda

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid., 33.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid., 34.

¹⁵ Ibid., 64.

¹⁶ Sen, *The Argumentative Indian*, 78.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid., 29.

The word literally means ‘the science of longevity’¹⁹ and was believed to be divinely inspired. This divinity also meant it was a closed system, giving it an unscientific character because there was no room for modification.²⁰ Ancient *ayurvedic* practitioners were, however, rational, empirical observers open to revision,²¹ underscored best in the *Susruta-Samhita*’s emphasis on dissection and direct observation of human anatomy,²² something in stark contrast to the exhortations of the leading Greek rationalist, Aristotle, who did not encourage experimental observation in anatomy.²³

Native medicine was therefore not simply magico-religious but based on empirical observation. Practitioners were respected, even revered. However, respect towards healers declined during the late-Vedic period and they became roving physicians or *caranavaidya*, outcasts from mainstream society. Their contact with heterodox ascetics, many of whom were Buddhist, Jain, and Ajivaka²⁴ contributed to a vast storehouse of medical knowledge.²⁵ For the Buddhists in particular, medical knowledge was integral to religious doctrine. They were the first to establish hospitals in their monasteries, including the ones at Taxila, and the first Buddhist emperor Asoka proclaimed edicts to the effect of establishing medical facilities for humans and animals all throughout the empire.²⁶ Some oriental chemists would have the nerve to claim later that given the accuracy of some ancient *ayurvedic* potions, descriptions for their preparation was inserted in ancient texts by Europeans!²⁷

¹⁹ Baber, *The Science of Empire*, 37.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid., 38.

²² Ibid., 39.

²³ Ibid., 40.

²⁴ Ibid., 41.

²⁵ Ibid., 42.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid., 45.

Science in Medieval India

If sustained, institutionalized scientific activity is to develop an economic surplus need exist in the hands of the state or nobles, who spend liberally on intellectual pursuits. Such conditions existed in medieval India. Or, put differently, scientific activity does flourish under strong, centralized state systems, not necessarily only under a laissez-faire model where the scientist is free from bureaucratic interference. The eventual decline and collapse of the Mughal Empire ended an era of patronage for large scale scientific endeavors.

Cotton Manufacture

The Indian subcontinent was the largest producer of cotton textiles before being surpassed by British machinery in the Industrial Revolution.²⁸ This demonstrates a high degree of technical and organizational skill, a far cry from the barbarism supposed by Mill's reading into Indian history.

Mill and his cohorts did have some praise to offer for Indian textile exports, especially the permanency of dyes transferred to fabric, which incidentally created the vast export market for Indian fabrics in the first place. The weaver's loom on the other hand was an instrument 'little else than a few sticks or pieces of wood, connected by the rudest contrivances' and stood in marked contrast to its delicate end product.²⁹ That is precisely what they failed to realize: the textile industry was simple, but the process of manufacture required expertise of a high degree.³⁰

²⁸ Ibid., 55.

²⁹ Ibid., 60.

³⁰ Ibid., 61.

The technology was also suited to the social structure prevailing in India at the time. Labor was cheap and in abundant supply and the export market was stable because of a lack of any serious international competition. These are not conditions for innovative change, nor was there any such need. Social factors such as these are usually ignored when this simple Indian technology is compared with the mechanized textile industry of Britain during the Industrial Revolution. Let us not forget that the Industrial Revolution as it played out in Britain was just as much a social revolution as a technological one,³¹ and that machines may have over time ‘erringly’ become the ‘measure of man.’³²

Wootz

The Indian steel industry during the Mughal period was testament to the complexity of metallurgical processes which the Indians had mastered. Abul Fazl’s *Ain-i-Akbari* is the prime source of information on this industry. The prize manufacture of precolonial India was a kind of steel called *wootz* made of high carbon content used in ‘Damascus’ swords.³³ British observers in the eighteenth-century took detailed notes on iron manufacturing in India; “from what I have seen of Indian iron, I consider the worst to be as good as the best English iron.”³⁴ Metallurgical advances meant the production of more numerous and better quality firearms which were in the sixteenth-century at the apex of industrial technology.³⁵ Even the *Congreve* rockets used against

³¹ Ibid., 63.

³² Ibid., 95.

³³ Ibid., 66.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

Napoleon during the Battle of Waterloo were developed from *ban*-rockets employed by Tipu Sultan's forces against the British.³⁶

Irrigation Technology

The development of the cotton industry in India, and the subsequent foreign trade, was largely dependent on a vast system of irrigation and other sophisticated agricultural techniques, without which it would have been impossible.³⁷ So elemental were the irrigation works that India began to be classified as a 'hydraulic society', with thinkers such as Hegel and Montesquieu developing somewhat absurd connections between artificial irrigation and 'Oriental despotism.'³⁸ Well, one of the greatest effects of these hydraulic enterprises, patronized by many medieval rulers, was the transformation of the Punjab into the breadbasket of India, which would have otherwise been a desolate region supporting patchy pastoral communities.³⁹

Unani Medicine

The ancient *Ayurvedic* system continued into the medieval period but was increasingly influenced by the works of Averroes, Avicenna, and Galen, and birthed the *Unani* blend of healing.⁴⁰ *Unani* means 'Greek' and is probably a corruption of 'Ionian.'⁴¹ This is the first example of a synthesis of eastern and western medical doctrines in India. This synthesis, and the

³⁶ Ibid., 68.

³⁷ Ibid., 70.

³⁸ Ibid., 73.

³⁹ Ibid., 78.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

rational experimentation upon which *Unani* medicine was founded, surprised many western observers. For example in Bengal, the indigenous system against full-blown smallpox was based on inoculation or *tikah* for a good century and a half.⁴² Among the first attempts to develop a composite medical system drawing on a wide variety of sources was undertaken by Bahwa Khan, one of Sikandar Lodi's ministers, and subsequently by the court physician Hakim Yusufi during the reign of the Mughal Babur and his son Humayun.⁴³ Abdul Shirazi during Shahjahan's reign and Muhammad Akbar Arsani during the time of Aurangzeb also tried to create a synthesis of Arabian, Persian and *Ayurvedic* practices.⁴⁴ This demonstrates clearly that medieval indigenous practitioners were not averse to the incorporation of newer methods and knowledge from external sources as long as they proved to be beneficial.

Science of the Heavens

The Mughal rulers were enthusiastic patrons of astronomy and astrology. The stars governed their lives minutely, so astrology and astronomy went hand in hand in medieval India. One use of astronomy was the compilation of calendars. The solar *Ilahi*-era calendar was launched by Fathullah Shiraz during Akbar's reign, giving way to the lunar *Hijri* calendar during Aurangzeb's reign, only to be put into disuse by his successors.

The most interesting advance in astronomy made after Mughal zenith was by Raja Jai Singh II in Rajasthan. A rare combination of statesman and scientist, he built five large observatories in five

⁴² *Ibid.*, 80.

⁴³ Panikkar, *Colonialism, Culture, Resistance*, 168.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 169.

different cities between 1722 and 1739.⁴⁵ Singh's efforts are an example of a culture, distinct from the western, spending heavily on a project of science which is usually considered the monopoly of the Occident. Most of these observatories were built not of metal but lime and stone⁴⁶ because the hot climate of northern India would have induced expansion in metal instruments irreparably damaging their accuracy.⁴⁷ At about the same time in Europe, Isaac Newton had just finished publishing *Principia* and the Copernican revolution took a hold of European imagination. Jai Singh's observatories were conspicuous for the presence of European astronomers and he even sent court astronomers to Portugal, although they were not interested in new developments in the field there and Jai Singh remained unaware of Copernicus's heliocentric model.

This cross-cultural exchange represented, albeit sadly, the last instance of scientific exchanges between Indian and western cultures.⁴⁸ Jai Singh's endeavors are important also because they attempt to shatter the myth of Protestantism as the only cultural substructure upon which advanced science and technology can germinate.⁴⁹ This *sui generis* position of the West, characterized by private property, democracy, humanism, and rational law, is faced by major theoretical problems when advances in science in civilizations where rational cosmologies are not hegemonic are made and not accounted for.⁵⁰

Science in Colonial India

⁴⁵ Baber, *The Science of Empire*, 85.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 87.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 88.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 89.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 91.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 92.

The East India Company came to India with the explicit purpose of trading in spice, in competition with Dutch merchants. It would not be hard to find a connection between the scientific revolution in Europe and colonialism, both of which occurred concurrently.

Calicoe Craze

Since demand for spice was limited, the East India Company began importing Indian textiles into Britain, especially after French linens were banned in the country. The value of incoming cotton, chintz, calicoe and muslin from India soared.⁵¹ The local woolen and silk industry, not fine enough for high fashion, suffered, leading to resentment expressed in eloquent pamphlets: “Europe like a body in warm bath with its veins opened lies bleeding to death and her bullion which is the life blood of trade flows to India . . . to enrich the Great Moghul’s subjects.”⁵² Weavers’ riots led to the passing of the Calicoe Bill which became Act in 1720, prohibiting import of all non-British stained and dyed calicoes. This did not stop the craze, however, and prompted the incisive writer Daniel Defoe to quip: “Two things among us are too ungovernable, viz., our passions and our fashions.”⁵³

Indian produce, arriving in Britain on Indian-built ships, was also threatening for business, so much so that Court of Directors ordered a stop to the use of Indian ships, revealing a deep-seated sense of economic insecurity.⁵⁴

⁵¹ Ibid., 115.

⁵² Ibid., 116.

⁵³ Ibid., 117.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 222.

Cotton Trade

Foreign cotton at first and then, after the ban, fueled the Industrial Revolution in Britain, leading Eric Hobsbawm to remark that: “Whoever says Industrial Revolution says cotton . . . the cotton industries of Lancashire and Manchester.”⁵⁵ By 1813, heavy duties on import of Indian cotton to Britain were imposed while cheap British textiles began flooding the Indian market. Karl Marx observed that “Till 1813, India had been chiefly an exporting country, while it now became an importing one . . . [T]he great workshop of cotton manufacture for the world since immemorial times, became now inundated with English twists and cotton stuffs.”⁵⁶ Things became so bad that “the bones of cotton weavers were bleaching the plains of India.”⁵⁷ The ban on import of cotton from India contributed significantly to the germination of the Industrial Revolution in British society.

The Great Surveys

Western science was introduced first to India through the pioneering efforts of individual colonial administrators and amateur scientists. Their primary scientific concern was a topographical and statistical survey of the land they had come to acquire through force of arms. These scientific surveys also helped in transforming a trading company into a colonial state.⁵⁸

In 1760, three years after the Battle of Plassey, James Rennell arrived in India. His name is associated with the development of scientific geography in India. His geographic, economic and

⁵⁵ Ibid., 118.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 119.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 138.

political surveys, such as the *Bengal Atlas*, proved invaluable to local administrators but the expenses incurred often put him at odds with the Court of Directors who still viewed the Company's primary concern as that of trade.⁵⁹ He dedicated his work to the patron governors Robert Clive and Warren Hastings.⁶⁰ His work led to the expansion and consolidation of British power in Bengal.

An amateur but accomplished botanist in the person of Francis Buchanan also served the colonial cause politically. He was charged by Lord Wellesley to survey the natural history of Mysore.⁶¹ The result convinced skeptical Directors against the war with Tipu Sultan that Mysore was a prosperous province worthy of conquest. Tipu was painted in a negative light, a despotic destroyer, a rampaging oriental; any evidence of scientific progress was dismissed as the 'hopeless gropings of a despot whose authoritarian decrees betrayed a total ignorance of what genuine modernization required.'⁶²

Asiatic Society of Bengal

William Jones, whom we have met earlier, established the *Asiatic Society* in 1784 modelled on the *Royal Society of London* and he hoped it would imitate it in success also with, one day, "a Halley as their secretary, and a Newton their president."⁶³ Warren Hastings while declining the post of first president became an ardent patron of the fledgling institution. Jones was

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 141.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 149.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 149.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 153.

subsequently nominated president and has been credited with, in the words of Nehru, “for the rediscovery of her [India’s] past literature.”⁶⁴

Jones was a scholar of remarkable ability and by the time he died, was master in twenty eight different local languages.⁶⁵ “The institutionalization of Western science in India commences for all practical purposes with the establishment of the *Asiatic Society of Bengal*.”⁶⁶ It trained orientalists who participated in the now famous Orientalist-Anglicist debate of 1835. Of course, in the end, the goal of establishing the *Society* was for the purpose of devising the best means of ruling Bengal.

Botanical Gardens

Botanical gardens were established in Calcutta in the wake of the famines which devastated Bengal in the eighteenth-century. This move also contributed to the consolidation of colonial power in India. The two most important plants introduced to Indian clime by the British were the tea and cinchona plant.

The tea plant was first transferred from China. British import of tea from China in the eighteenth-century was costing quite a lot in bullion. Tea plants were thus planted in the Himalayan foothills as well as the area around Bengal, which shared the same tropical climate of

⁶⁴ Ibid., 154.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 155.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

Canton.⁶⁷ Soon tea became one of the leading British exports by the nineteenth-century, even supplanting Chinese tea in the international market.⁶⁸

The rebellion of 1857 brought an end to the rule of the Company and ushered in the period of direct rule by the Crown. This brought in a significant number of more British troops, as native soldiers could no longer be trusted (artillery was restricted to British troops only). This created a hitherto unforeseen problem: that of the susceptibility of ‘Tommy’ to tropical diseases, chief among them malaria. A decision was thus made to transport the cinchona plant of the Peruvian Andes to India. The use of bark of the cinchona tree by Peruvian Indian healers to treat malaria was well known and the earlier model of the transfer of tea from China was followed.⁶⁹ Antidotes from the cinchona plantations, such as quinine, were prepared. British officials were quick to emphasize the humanitarianism of moves such as these, calling them “one of the measures for which British rule in India will be entitled to the gratitude of the people of India.”⁷⁰ However, not everyone could purchase quinine to cure malaria, which, while being available only in Bengal and not throughout the length and breadth of India, went mostly to Government Medical Stores for the use of troops, British officials, and their families.⁷¹ Cinchona cultivation and plantations in India were also indispensable for the conquest of malaria-prone Africa.⁷²

Joseph Dalton Hooker, a graduate of Glasgow University, surveyed parts of India and other regions of the world, and the work he produced, *Flora of British India*, helped his close friend

⁶⁷ Ibid., 169.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 170.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 171.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 173.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid.

Charles Darwin reflect on the distribution of species in a wide area thereby contributing to the development of the evolutionary theory of biology.⁷³

Enter Western Medicine

With the coming of the colonials, western medicine was given a great filip by the state apparatus while indigenous medicine was discriminated against, the attitude even turning to hostility. Damning effects of this odium multiplied when colonial medicine was not produced in vast enough quantities to meet the demands of a large, expansive population whereas indigenous practices were discouraged and attacked by state apparatuses.⁷⁴

A threat to the new medicine was the rise in quack doctors who had a rudimentary dabbling of knowledge in western medicinal practices because of which they were beginning to undermine its perceived effectiveness and threatening its hegemonic potential over the indigenous systems and the very power base of the colonial state itself.⁷⁵ Consequently, a medical council was set up and an Act passed which introduced a system of registration of medical practitioners.⁷⁶ This further undermined indigenous medicine, the practitioners calling the government's policy "an act of cultural oppression."⁷⁷

Despite all this, the solipsism of western medicine catered to only a small section of the population whereas indigenous medicine had an unprejudiced practitioner in every village in

⁷³ Ibid., 175.

⁷⁴ Panikkar, *Colonialism, Culture, Resistance*, 170.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 170.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 171.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 172.

India,⁷⁸ administering to the needs of “nine-tenths of the vast population who are quite unprovided for by any official medical aid.”⁷⁹ Native knowledge was not the preserve of any one caste⁸⁰ and Ayurvedic treatments were exceptionally cheap, costing about four hundred times less than what western medical dispensaries provided.⁸¹ This was the main reason for the popularity of the indigenous system.⁸² “Give us political power,” local practitioners would say “then we will show which system is effective, scientific and superior. The reason for the success of western medicine in India is undoubtedly the support of the government!”⁸³

Revitalization

A revitalization movement of indigenous medicine was begun to counter the foreign challenge. It gained force in the person of Panniyinpalli Sankunni Variar who descended from a family of well-respected Ayurveic physicians.

Born in 1869, Variar’s education was largely traditional. He became an accomplished Ayurvedic by age twenty.⁸⁴ When western medicine started to become popular, he undertook an extensive study of the English language and was eventually instructed in the western system at government hospitals for three years. While wholly rooted in traditional practices, he gained respect for the western and modern approach. Because he staunchly repudiated any form of sectarianism, he

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 173.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 172.

⁸¹ Ibid., 173.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Ibid., 176.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 177.

earned the respect of all castes and creeds to such an extent that during the Mappila uprising of 1921 when Hindu landlords were being murdered, Variar's house was a safe haven for Hindus and Muslims; Mappilas even took turns standing guard outside his house.⁸⁵

Variar attempted to revitalize indigenous learning through retrieval of lost knowledge, institution building, and the preparation and distribution of medicine along western lines.⁸⁶ Realizing that Western medicine was popular because it was easily available, he undertook a large-scale manufacture of indigenous medicine which was hugely successful.⁸⁷

Scientific Education and Public Works

The British colonial state used India as a testing ground for a number of social experiments, the results of which were transferrable to the mother country or other parts of the empire. One of these experiments was the introduction of scientific education in the hopes of creating “useful members of the body politic.”⁸⁸ The introduction of western scientific education was also one of the central issues debated during the Anglicist-Orientalist controversy.

A number of state-sponsored public works were also begun coinciding with changes in the education policy of the colonial state. The Public Works Department was created in the aftermath of the famous Wood's Dispatch of 1854.⁸⁹ One of the first public projects that garnered interest was repair of the ruined irrigation networks and construction of new canals.

This was challenging because canal irrigation was not common in England and special civil

⁸⁵ Ibid., 178.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 179.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 185.

⁸⁸ Baber, *The Science of Empire*, 186.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 206.

engineers had to be trained. The Ganga Canal Project that was formed birthed the Thomason Civil Engineering College.⁹⁰ Engineering colleges such as these in India provided models for replication in England where such formal institutions did not exist.⁹¹

Steam and Rail

Public works also encouraged the introduction of steam power in India. William Bentinck was an avid supporter of using steamboats in the colony; he called them the “great engine of moral improvement.”⁹² To Dalhousie, telegraphs, a postal system, and railways constituted the “three great engines of social improvement” in India.⁹³

Introduction of railways in India may have been conceived as a means of social modernization and moral regeneration, but the ulterior motive was military and imperial. A major factor in those regards was the slow speeds of transport of cotton from the Deccan to the harbors. The need to speed up transport of the produce from inland plantations to the coast was made all the more urgent after the American ‘cotton famine’ of 1846. The Lancashire industrialists saw the need of constructing railway lines to and from Bombay, which to them were really “an extension of their line from Manchester to Liverpool.”⁹⁴ Railways would also provide “full intelligence of any event at five times the speed.”⁹⁵ The high cost of constructing these lines was diluted

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Ibid., 207.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 208.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

through an ingenious solution: “make the Hindoos pay for the railways, and us to reap a large portion of the profits.”⁹⁶

Modern scholars point out that Dalhousie’s “three great engines” which set social innovation in India in motion may have triggered the rebellion after he had left office. However, it was these three, especially the telegraph and railway lines, that enabled the colonial state to ruthlessly suppress the Mutiny of 1857. But the rail, proclaimed as the harbinger of social modernization, also failed on that account. It did not bring an end to the caste system, as had been hoped. Passengers of different castes refused to share coaches with one another and trains had to make stops for lunch and dinner so passengers of each caste could prepare their own food separately by the side of the tracks.⁹⁷ First class coaches were usually reserved for Europeans, middle class for the Anglo-Indians, followed by Hindus and Muslims in third class.⁹⁸

Use of rail failed to give the Indian economy the shot in the booster that had been hoped for. Unlike Japan, where rail transport had been introduced in 1872, and where many lines were soon built without any foreign help, ultimately helping Japanese economy to soar toward capitalist heights, the case was markedly different in India.⁹⁹ This is the clearest demonstration, if any, of the difference between a country running its own affairs and one dependent on the hand-me-downs of an imperial power.¹⁰⁰

Board of Scientific Advice

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 211.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

Established by Lord Curzon in 1902, the Board of Scientific Advice was created to coordinate scientific research in India. The Board provided scientists in India to take part in a “controlled experiment in the coordination of scientific policy in the vast ‘social laboratory’ of Imperial India.”¹⁰¹ The Board is another example, like public canal works, of a formal institution not existing in the mother country but being replicated there after successes in the peripheral colony. The Advisory Council on Scientific and Industrial Research, established in England in 1915, was based on the Board of Scientific Advice.¹⁰² The Board, although unable to solve the problem of recurring famines, instituted the proper start of scientific policy in India.

The Indian Response

The Indian response to the introduction to western science and technology has not been holistic. The first use conceived of advances in science and technology was to reindustrialize a country deindustrialized by colonial misrule. Industries in India lay in shambles, with the agricultural sector, irrigation works, and technical institutes taking up most of the state’s attention. India was geared towards agriculture, while Britain pursued technology and industry.¹⁰³ Only the outbreak of the First World War, which brought a need for a sharp increase in munitions output, brought home to the colonial administrators that industry had been utterly neglected in India.¹⁰⁴ Officials naturally blamed the lack of industrial development in India to the cultural aversion of Indians to industry “accentuated by an unpractical system of education.”¹⁰⁵

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 217.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 218.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 221.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

The introduction of modern science and technology in India cannot be seen as an imposition by the colonial administration. Indians played a very active role in the institutionalization of modern science and technology in India and a view otherwise is a very mechanistic explanation for the complex process of institutionalization of science in the country.

Of course, western science, especially medicine was not altogether accepted by Indians, intelligentsia or lay. K. T. Telang, a reformer and nationalist leader of some repute, refused to undergo the simplest of surgeries on religious grounds, a decision which ultimately cost him his life.¹⁰⁶

Malaviya

Pandit Madan Mohan Malaviya, member of the Indian Industrial Commission, took it upon himself to challenge the prevailing notion at the time that the Industrial Revolution in England was a consequence of just the Protestant work ethic of the middle classes, “endowed with a spirit of enquiry and enterprise.”¹⁰⁷ He endeavoured to bring to light England’s Indian connection in the birth of capitalism and the flowering of Industrial Revolution.¹⁰⁸ He hoped to dispel notions of precolonial India being a kind of tabula rasa upon which modern science and technology needed to be imprinted. But he did this without resorting to nationalist pride.

The Industrial Revolution was the result of a specific kind of social and cultural mix that, to Malaviya, may or may not be replicable in the Indian context. Therefore, Britain was unsuited as a model for India, and the Indians in his estimation needed to look to the ‘Asian Germany,’

¹⁰⁶ Panikkar, *Colonialism, Culture, Resistance*, 170.

¹⁰⁷ Baber, *The Science of Empire*, 222.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

Japan.¹⁰⁹ Malaviya's conclusions were included as an appendix to the Report of the Indian Industrial Commission, but went largely ignored.¹¹⁰ With the memory of the First World War growing older, India was condemned to "grow potato and paddy."¹¹¹

Roy and Khan

The Indian intelligentsia responded to western science and technology by attempting to adopt it through the medium of a western education. Rammouhan Roy and Syed Ahmed Khan attempted to reinterpret the *Vedanta* and the *Quran* in the light of modernity respectively. In the words of Roy, it was science which "raised the natives of Europe above the inhabitants of other parts of the world."¹¹² Roy was greatly influenced by Unitarian ideas as we have already seen.

Khan declared that "any religion which is true or claims to be true cannot contain such elements in it as are contrary to nature and offend human reason" and that a proper Muslim ought to balance "philosophy in his right hand and natural science in his left."¹¹³ Khan set up the *Aligarh Scientific Society* in 1864, whose mandate, echoing the words of James Mill, was to dispel the 'night of ignorance' from India. In fact, the first book translated by the *Society* was *Elements of Political Economy* by James Mill.¹¹⁴

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 224.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 225.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹¹² Panikkar, *Colonialism, Culture, Resistance*, 169.

¹¹³ Baber, *The Science of Empire*, 226.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 227.

Muslim clerics naturally responded to Khan's modernizing mission with hostile venom. Khan's remarkable mastery of Islamic religious texts was mocked. He was "as skilled in religion as a monkey who has fallen into a pan of indigo and considers himself to be a peacock."¹¹⁵

Some Indian Scientists

Although the Indian response to western scientific and technological education was enthusiastic, Indian scientists were discriminated against because of the view that Indians were incapable of holding their own in scientific research.¹¹⁶ Most of the faculty that taught scientific subjects in elite colleges like Presidency and Calcutta were recruited from England, despite there being well-deserving, qualified Indians at home.¹¹⁷ For instance, J. C. Bose, trained at Cambridge and taught by leading physicist Francis Darwin, and admired by the celebrated Scots-Irish mathematical physicist and engineer Lord Kelvin, landed in troubled waters upon his appointment as junior professor of physics at the Presidency College.¹¹⁸ He eventually took the job at two-thirds the pay but never took his salary in protest.¹¹⁹

Pramatha Nath Bose was a geologist of some distinction. He graduated from London University, was a fellow of the *Geological Society*, but resigned in disgust from his job at the Geological Survey of India after twenty-three years of bearing prejudice. His move to the private sector soon

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 228.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*

resulted in the discovery of iron ore deposits in Jamshedpur, where the now famous Tata Iron and Steel Works began later.¹²⁰

Radhanath Sikdar, a member of the Great Trigonometrical Survey, accomplished much in geodesy, the science of projecting the three-dimensional surface of the earth onto a two-dimensional plane. His work was acknowledged by Sir George Everest himself, who said that Sikdar's "mathematical accomplishment was the equal of any in India or Europe."¹²¹

P. C. Ray, a chemist trained at Edinburgh, was forced to wait more than a year to be appointed as a measly temporary assistant professor.¹²² He eventually established a chemical laboratory in Calcutta. During his research, he was convinced himself that heavy industrialization, and the use of chemistry to that end, was the salvation of India's technological problems.¹²³ This brought him into conflict with the Gandhian anti-industrial stance. But then his views began to change radically. "At the most two millions earn their bread in the industrial centers of India," he would ask, "but what of the remaining 318 million?"¹²⁴ "Will you wait till Manchesters, Liverpools, Glasgows and Dundees spring up here and transfer seventy percent of the rural population to India? I am afraid you will have to wait until doomsday."¹²⁵

Gandhi's own views on heavy industrialization were skeptical. He is famously reported to have said: "God forbid that India should ever take to industrialization after the manner of the West. The economic imperialism of a tiny island kingdom (England) is today keeping the world in

¹²⁰ Dasgupta, *Awakening*, 400.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 401.

¹²² Baber, *The Science of Empire*, 229.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, 231.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*

chains. If an entire nation of 300 million took to similar economic exploitation, it would strip the world bare like locusts.’¹²⁶

Sircar

It was in the light of this structural racism toward scientists of Indian origin that Mahendar Lal Sircar proposed establishing a native-controlled scientific institution. Sircar was a student of Calcutta Medical College. He was quite the “medical maverick”, and soon abandoned his western allopathic training for homeopathy.¹²⁷ One of his main motives was to foster a culture of research among his fellow scientists, which would free his countrymen from traditional dogmatism. To that end he formed the Indian Association for the Cultivation of Sciences (IACS) in 1876.¹²⁸ He would lecture there on physics and repeat experiments in electricity and magnetism of the greats in the field, such as Michael Faraday and Benjamin Franklin.¹²⁹ However, the Association’s greatest achievement was when the brightest student there, C. V. Raman, won the Nobel Prize for theoretical physics in 1930 for the discovery of the ‘Raman effect,’¹³⁰ becoming the first Asian ever to do so.

Bose

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 247.

¹²⁷ Dasgupta, *Awakening*, 403.

¹²⁸ Baber, *The Science of Empire*, 229.

¹²⁹ Dasgupta, *Awakening*, 405.

¹³⁰ Baber, *The Science of Empire*, 230.

A graduate of the University of Calcutta, Jagadish Chandra Bose proceeded to London to study medicine but ill health thwarted these ambitions.¹³¹ This prompted him to enroll at Cambridge and begin reading under Nobel Laureate Lord Raleigh for the natural sciences: chemistry, physics, zoology, and botany.¹³² His return to India and finding relevant employment there was not without its difficulties, and was only resolved through the timely intervention of Lord Ripon.¹³³ He became the first Indian professor of physics at Presidency College.¹³⁴

Bose's active mind soon turned towards research. At the time, there were no purpose-built research laboratories in India. He began his inquiry into the properties of radio waves,¹³⁵ training his own 'tinsmith' assistant himself, but otherwise "technician, instrument maker, experimentalist all rolled into one."¹³⁶ His inquiries led him to write to Rabindranath Tagore, convinced that the boundary between the living and the nonliving was far from clear.¹³⁷ He even went so far as to claim the similarity of responsiveness of living and dead matter to various stimuli like wit, heat, electric current, and chemicals, something which has come to known as the 'Boseian thesis.'¹³⁸

This line of research led him to abandon physics altogether becoming instead a plant physiologist attempting to demonstrate the similarity of responses to stimuli between plants and animals.¹³⁹

These experiments were inspired by an *adviatic* strain in his thinking. Even his first book,

¹³¹ Dasgupta, *Awakening*, 408.

¹³² *Ibid.*, 408.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, 412.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, 416.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, 417.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, 418.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, 419.

Response in the Living and Nonliving began with the following refrain from the *Rig Veda*: “The real is one: wise men call it variously.”¹⁴⁰

Although his life’s work did not lead to the ‘discovery’ of radio waves, nor did it cause any great breakthroughs in science, he did publish up to a dozen scientific articles in the leading English scientific journals of the time, *The Electrician* and *Proceedings of the Royal Society*, proving in the end that the western contempt for Indian research and researchers was wholly unfounded and unscientific.

Saha

Many of the chemist P. C. Ray’s views were opposed by his students. Meghnad Saha was one of these. An astrophysicist by education, Saha backed the Indian National Congress’s program of heavy industrialization throughout India,¹⁴¹ unlike his mentor, who had become convinced of the Gandhian scheme of cottage and village industries.

Saha, together with other leading and influential Indian scientists, came to be known as the ‘Science and Culture Group’ which advocated the use of heavy industrialization as in the Soviet Union.¹⁴² Saha published 2,100 articles and 4,600 notes attacking Gandhian “regressiveness.”¹⁴³ He even attempted to contest elections for a seat to Parliament on a Congress ticket but was declined party nomination because he refused to recant his anti-Gandhian stance labelling it a

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

¹⁴¹ Baber, *The Science of Empire*, 232.

¹⁴² Ibid., 232.

¹⁴³ Ibid.

“very retrograde and unscientific mentality.”¹⁴⁴ He ultimately contested the elections as an independent candidate and won, becoming both scientist and politician.¹⁴⁵ He was thus able to influence the future scientific policy of the country to a great degree and, despite his differences with Congress, remained extremely influential in its higher administrative circles.¹⁴⁶

Ramanujan

Srinivasa Ramanujan, like Bose, but unlike Saha, Sircar, Raman or Ray, tried to draw on Indian cultural resources in an attempt to respond to western mathematics.¹⁴⁷ His story is a familiar one. Working as a clerk, Ramanujan’s employer, seeing his gift for mathematics, encouraged him to get in touch with Godfrey H. Hardy, a mathematician at Cambridge. Hardy, impressed by Ramanujan’s ability to crack the toughest mathematical nuts in the business, invited him to Cambridge where he enthralled onlookers with the ease with which he solved complex mathematical problems but startled them all the same with his complete lack of formal education in mathematics.¹⁴⁸ Ramanujan would often embarrass his English colleagues by explaining to them that his methodology of arriving at his groundbreaking solutions was not his own but inspired by the goddess Namgiri.¹⁴⁹

Attempts to give him a formal grounding in mathematics eventually failed. One mathematician admitted that teaching a man of his caliber was “like writing on a blackboard covered with

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 233.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 234.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

excerpts from a more interesting lecture.”¹⁵⁰ Ramanujan if we allow ourselves this one superstitious transgression, was all but the twentieth-century reincarnation of Bhaskara II who like him also worked on the theory of numbers some millennia before. It is important to admit here at the close that Ramanujan’s creativity was definitely the result of cross-cultural encounters,¹⁵¹ if not the persistent visits of a deity from another plane.

Science Today

The positive influence of western science on the mind and society is not a moot question today. But it will not do to understand the introduction of western science and technology to India as simply the replacement of the frozen-in-time indigenous with the sudden, external alien. Likewise, let us not ignore the “complex process of negotiation, contestation, cooptation and resistance at work.”¹⁵² Neither is the view that “colonial science has survived colonialism’s departure from the third world in the form of a Trojan Horse” an ontologically valid one.¹⁵³ While the ongoing ecological crisis in India does indeed stem from modern science and technology, blaming the western scientific outlook in trite, overused terms such as ‘mechanistic worldview’, ‘domination of nature’, ‘Eurocentric worldview’, and ‘Judeo-Christian tradition’ is to oversimplify matters.¹⁵⁴ Many European intellectuals, such as Goethe and Giordano Bruno, were loud critics of a mechanistic worldview now blamed to be western.¹⁵⁵ Let us also not assume that western science was indeed altogether western. ‘Western’ science was never ‘pure’.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 235.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, 251.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 253.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

Also, Jawaharlal Nehru's policies of investment in heavy industrialization and the pursuit of science and technology in the western fashion by Indians has now come to be criticized.¹⁵⁶ What the critics fail to realize that it is silly blaming one individual for a complex constellation of social, cultural and historical processes at work. However, problems with such policies are now becoming apparent.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 254.

Conclusion

This has been a brief introduction to the origins of modernity in South Asia. Let us summarize here some of the insights that have been gleaned from the work thus far.

Society

Indian society at the advent of the colonial period was politically fragmented but not culturally dead. Conquest of the Indian subcontinent by the East India Company ushered in a period of decline in indigenous culture. Before their arrival, Indians had not been completely unaware of the goings-on in Europe. Their observations were appreciative of the scientific and technological advances but critical of the social norms that had brought them about.

British control of the Indian subcontinent employed a number of strategies, including selective appropriation of native culture and the spread of the myth of a changeless society. Many orientalists like William Jones, who established the *Royal Asiatic Society*, opened up the vistas of western learning to India.

It was this give and take with the West that ushered in the Indian Renaissance. The Indian version was actually a combination of the humanist and enlightenment processes that had occurred separately in the West. Indians reacted to the changes in their society in a number of ways. The elite, with their closer proximity to European influences, were quick to adapt and adopt while the illiterate masses remained mostly unaffected.

Be that as it may, the intelligentsia did leave its mark. The reformers were of two kinds: the 'back-to-the-basics' and the westernizer. Despite their differences, both groups saw an urgent need to rejuvenate society. The latter group was led by Raja Rammouhan Roy, often considered to be the face of the Indian Renaissance and the first modern Indian. He led a campaign to abolish *sati*, the Brahman practice of burning widows alive.

However, the literati were responsible for a number of intellectual failings, chief among them being kindling a false consciousness, i.e., overemphasizing the accomplishments of the West, a colonial metanarrative, which prevented an indigenous body of thought to develop. The self-image of the Indians was also harmed. This caused the search for an alternative modernity to intensify, which was in effect the middle path, not too traditional or overtly western, but ended in disaster because the society that eventually emerged after the twentieth-century was a confused mix of westernization and modernity.

The emancipation of women from social seclusion and their eventual participation in the independence movement is perhaps the greatest legacy of Indian society's brush with modernity. The British administrators at first had cast their lot in favour of maintaining the status quo that upheld the segregation of women because of the support they had received by the landed gentry against the rebels in the Mutiny of 1857. With time, and pressure from modernizing elements among the Hindu and Muslim elite, their attitude changed.

The second local institution that underwent severe stresses was that of caste, which was shaken and discredited by the exertions of men like Saraswati and Ambedkar. The third most important change that modernity brought about was the spread of a modern, westernized education. British colonialism had at first quashed the impressive and widespread network of traditional schools

that had existed here for centuries. One of the greatest threats the Indians felt was Christian proselytization at the expense of centuries of tradition and custom. This feeling was aggravated by the support the missionaries got from the state, as well as the scorn with which their age-old learning was treated. This interaction produced a new breed of education institutions. Aligarh College was founded in the spirit of reproachment with the British whilst Nadwa and Jamia Islamia tried to preserve long-standing identities. Regardless of the response, one thing beyond doubt is that it was an English education that gave a national character to the Indians without which India would not have been a united country but a medley of rival states like Europe.

Politics

The realm of politics too was altered with the advent of the modernity introduced by the British. The single most important change was a unification of the Indian polity under a parliamentary-style government with regular elections and civilian control of the military, a change which has remarkably survived in India to this day.

The institution of democracy may have been a foreign implant to Indian soil, but the soil we was prepared, albeit even to a small extent, many a century ago with the long tradition of public debate and reasoning encouraged between members of opposing sects and religions. Toleration and religious heterodoxy have been a proud part of Indian life for centuries. Asoka, the first Buddhist monarch, was also the first to codify civil public discussion.

However, these prerogatives were not enough to stem the tide of the undemocratic superstructure that grew in the Mughal ages down to conquest by the British and ultimately stifled the growth

of democracy. The merchant class was continually raided for added wealth whereas in Europe, they were protected and fattened, neither did great Indian cities develop as hubs of commerce and trade. Native intermediaries called the *zamindars* would pocket whatever surplus was gained and caste kept the people divided and indifferent to politics.

Indian observers visiting England in the nineteenth-century were shocked by the debates they heard in parliament. To some, these were even more fascinating than the industrial and technological advances they saw all around them because out of the divisive rivalries between the Tories and Whigs came stability and prosperity of the people. Yet, in great irony, these institutions were not replicated in India and instead, all leading political thinkers in Great Britain at the time used these very liberal ideals to justify subjugating, colonizing and ultimately draining the great wealth of India.

Because of the great influence of bourgeois-liberalism, little attention was given to alternative political institutions. Any exceptions, although noteworthy in the breadth of their scope, were greatly fantastical. During the independence era, the thought leaders were divided between those who spouted praises for the Westminster system and those who thought “it was a good idea.” Although democracy did win out in the end, the deep-seated communalism of the people failed to eradicate despite the diehard efforts of the reformers and preceptors, and these feelings of mutual hatred were stoked by colonial higher-ups to help them cling onto the jewel in Her Majesty’s Crown for just another century longer.

With the waning British rule, there was a limited attempt to flirt with other forms of government inspired by Nazi Germany and Communist Russia. These failed because they demanded a violent overthrow of the dying Raj. That was overkill because, although no strangers to the use of force,

the British ruled with persuasion and ‘clemency,’ and nonviolent Gandhism was enough to topple John Bull and send him packing in time. This was the most significant way then that British laid the seeds of democratic institutions in India: unwittingly.

Religion

Perhaps the greatest failure of modernity in India in any aspect is that of the failure of its society to rise up from the drudgery of a communal existence and embrace a secular outlook. Tolerance did develop in India in the ancient and medieval past as evinced in the lives of Asoka and Akbar and a plethora of others. In fact, religious tolerance and promotion of diversity was the norm for Mughal leaders and the bigoted policy of Aurangzeb was the exception.

‘True’ secular values were promoted by the colonial administration by the extensive education system it set up in response to the aggressive evangelizing of the Christian missionaries which they were worried would lead the people to revolt. Their worries were realized in the Mutiny of 1857.

The greatest effect of an influx of secular thinking was the long-awaited reformation of the great religions of India. It began with Rammohan Roy’s extensive study of the fathers of the European Enlightenment and the repurposing of their thought and ideas to reorganize Hinduism. There were blowbacks but great wisdom and courage were the hallmarks of the leading intellectuals of India at the time and they pressed home their advantage. What is interesting, however, is that almost all of the early reformers used religion to reform religion, that is to say, they initiated a reformation of their respective religions by quoting scripture that supported their arguments. This made the radicalism of their views more palatable to the masses.

With the rising humanism, religious exploitation was also brought to light and the tight hold that the gurus, yogis and maulvis had was challenged for the first time. The otherworldliness of religion was replaced by introspection of the suffering of human beings in this world. The pragmatism of religion became a focus, not doctrine, eschatology, ritual, or worship. The criticism of religion was a bit too radical for its time and many leading reformers reverted to their older positions under intellectual and social pressure and even gave voice to communalism by claiming the superiority of one religion over another.

Although the secularism that developed in India was the benign type that accepted a rickety equality between all religions (unlike the European model which shunned religious influence in public matters), this was its ultimate undoing. By keeping religion in play, religiosity was enhanced, and this increasing religiosity is threatening to breach the façade of neutrality in India today.

Economy and Industry

The old unilinear theories of the development and evolution of capitalism (slavery-feudalism-capitalism) have been debunked. Many ancient societies like the Chinese for example, were technologically well past the Europeans but did not develop in the direction of capitalism. One of the other great instigators of capitalism (and the Industrial Revolution), colonial plunder, was not a part of Indian history either. To reiterate, capitalism could not have developed in India without foreign influence.

Other medieval markers, such as the lack of private property in Mughal India, a large but ultimately inefficient and slow bureaucracy, preying on the trading class, and heavy pressure on

the peasantry all contributed to the quashing of the sapling of capitalism. Mughal industry was quite urbanized and exceptionally productive for its time. However, the fatal flaw was in the fact that the tools remained wooden and the manufactory did not develop as it did in Europe. Where it did, it did not produce for the consumption of the masses but catered to the nobles instead. Nor did they survive completion of large-scale projects like shipbuilding and huge architectural works. Interestingly, caste played a limited role in stifling capitalist tendencies as is often thought and upward social mobility and transfer of skills across castes did exist.

Although the drain of wealth from India ultimately did destroy her there also was a regenerative aspect of colonialism. In order for a new order to be established the old one had to go. Under British patronage India was unified by the rail and telegraph, private property, western education, modern science and economy supplanted centuries-old myth and superstition.

But true capitalist development did not occur under the aegis of the British. While a proletariat was created when the local handicraft industry was destroyed, no capital was generated. Ironically, first colonialism created the objective situation for the growth of capitalism by providing a modern education and transport facility by one of the most extensive networks of rail ever, it in the end, smothered this progress by extracting heavy tribute with which the Indian economy could not keep up.

Science

Modernity as it developed in India was a combination of three interconnected elements, namely the humanistic, universalistic, and scientific. The Renaissance and the Enlightenment which had developed in Europe had developed as such at different times and stages in European history.

Proto-Indian science, although largely concerned with social and religious implications, was well-advanced for its time, as is evidenced in the mathematically precise structures that have been unearthed in the Indus Valley archeological finds. The post-Vedic period saw the flowering of the Ayurvedic School whose practitioners were not bound by caste nor were they averse to taking in knowledge from outside sources.

The coming of the British many an institution was set up to try and understand India using scientific methods as well as introduce scientific modes of thinking to the natives. Botanical gardens sprung up almost everywhere. But at the same time, the native methods of science, especially medicine, were suppressed, even outlawed, and a myth of the superiority of western medicine was played out. While western medicine catered to only a small section of the population, indigenous medicine reached every village in India because they were cheap and easy to make.

The greatest obstruction to the spread of scientific education in India was the colonial apparatus itself, riven by racialism which did not recognize the wonderful advances in science that the natives made. The use of rail and other technological wonders that the British brought to India were used to suppress the country further and bleed it dry.

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