

Impact of british rule on india during 1857- 1867

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In Politics as in physical science, when one body impinges upon another the effect of the impact is determined not only by its force but also by its duration. The improbability becomes greater when we have regard to the highly developed and complex civilization with which the British came into contact. That civilization is an amalgam of two elements, one Hindu and one Muslim and at first sight the Islamic element might seem to offer the greater resistance to outside influence.

The uncompromising character of Islam is obvious, and in consonance with it the Muslims in India for a considerable time resisted the impact of Western education, took but little to science or industry, and hardly allowed their beliefs or their way of life to be influenced by the newcomers. Hinduism, on the other hand, has protected itself throughout the centuries by its flexibility and its absorptive capacity. In the British period European thought has profoundly affected the Hindus, with their great sensitivity to new ideas and spiritual influences.

They have become steeped in the Western scientific spirit; they have so absorbed European political ideals as to forget their foreign origin; and they have allowed even their conception and understanding of their own history and philosophy to be transformed by Western learning. Nevertheless, modern India is essentially a Hindu country and during the latter half of the British period Hinduism itself, after centuries of stagnation, has experienced a mighty resurgence. Thus it is that independent India is today governed in the main, not by Westernized intellectuals, but by men who regard themselves first and foremost as Hindus.

Both the main elements in Indian life and thought are in fact highly self-protective and it might therefore have been thought that the relatively brief impact of British rule would leave little permanent mark. Nevertheless, some of the evident effects of that rule have at least the appearance of permanence. In the first place, a strong and ubiquitous Central Government, administering a uniform system of law with a high degree of efficiency, relentlessly imposed homogeneity unknown in Indian history.

The Tamil, the Bengali, and the Gujarati for the first time obeyed the same law and observed the same forms in their dealings with authority; and in the process they were insensibly drawn closer together. Secondly, the introduction of English education brought the upper middle classes under the influence of Western thought at a time when nationalism was the most vital factor in the life of Europe, whilst at the same time the English language provided them with a common medium of communication.

In the third place, the Press, which was called into being by British example and influence, furnished Indians with a means of voicing their political aspirations, and so developing a common consciousness and knowledge of their growing strength. In all these ways, British rule fostered the growth of national feeling and built up a political unity not wholly dependent on the cohesive force provided by a strong foreign rule.

The process was clearly not complete by 1947 or partition would not have been necessary and it is an interesting speculation as to whether, if the steps to self-government had been slower, a unitary government would have been possible. The process of unification has not been wholly advantageous, for the development of a strong Central Government has undermined those

village institutions in which the political genius of India was most truly displayed.

The villages of ancient and mediaeval India were to a great extent self-governing and the forms of democracy which operated in them were perhaps more vital than those which have been so laboriously imposed on India in modern times. The community settled its affairs by common consent and looked for no interference from outside as long as the revenue due to the ruler was paid. Civic consciousness was strong, and the way of life in rural India was gracious.

Despite the protests of the wisest administrators, the East India Company steadily destroyed the political importance of the villages, and few things in British rule are more pathetic than the attempts, during the last seventy years, to re-create village institutions. It is only necessary to study the working of a modern District or Union Board, for example in Bengal, to realize how much India has lost by the over-centralization of authority. This loss must in fairness be set against the gain, which has resulted from political unity.

Although it is in the political sphere that the influence of British thought has been most spectacular, equally important has been the impact of Western science. India at an early stage made great contributions to scientific knowledge, but in the Middle Ages her intellectual life became stagnant and few signs of a true spirit of enquiry appeared. Nor did she experience anything even remotely comparable to that great revolution in ideas, which was brought about in Europe by such men as Galileo, Newton and Descartes.

Except to a limited extent in the field of astronomy, scientific learning was rare and the scientific spirit non-existent.

Thanks partly to Macaulay's own vehemence, English became the medium of instruction, and through that medium, by the end of the century, the scientific spirit had been rekindled. The change has not been wholly for the better, for it has given a materialistic twist to Indian thought and has introduced a worship of wealth, which was not present in the India of the Vedas or the Epics. On the other hand, intellectual India has received a new dynamic impulse and has become once again creative. For good or for ill, Western scientific thought has conditioned the Indian approach to all the problems of life, whether practical or speculative.

The degree of conditioning, however, has not been uniform in all directions, and one of our most difficult problems is to determine how far Western influence has affected religious sentiment and philosophy. It may be said at once that Islam has been singularly unaffected and our question thus need only be considered in relation to Hinduism. British influence has reacted on Hinduism by leading a small but important section of highly educated Indians to abandon their traditional Hindu thought and feeling and to adopt a Western outlook on life and philosophy.

A second effect of British influence was the growth of re-formed sects such as the Brahmo Samaj, which aimed at a synthesis of the best in Hinduism and Christianity. They were of considerable importance in the nineteenth century, but, like the thoroughgoing occidentalists, they faded into the background in the twentieth century. Thus, without in the least intending to do so, the British revived Hinduism after its long period of stagnation and

uncertainty. In the villages and smaller towns Hinduism remains strongly entrenched, but in the north of India there are, nevertheless, some signs of change.

Here and there are groups of men who reject the old taboos on intercaste dining; while the respect paid to men of higher caste is not so profound or so universal as of old. Villagers no longer gather so frequently round the feet of the village pundits to hear the recitation of the great epics in which their traditions are enshrined. These signs must be neither exaggerated nor ignored. They do not indicate rapid or revolutionary change, but they do mean that life and thought in the villages is no longer static.

Outside events and trends of thought press more closely upon the Indian villager today than ever before and they are unlikely to leave his beliefs and customs unchanged. Until the direction of the change becomes clear, no real assessment of British influence on Hinduism will be possible, but in the meantime it must be recognized that the intrusion of the outside world into the villages is the direct result of British rule. References Ainslie Thomas Embree , 1962. " Charles Grant and British Rule in India" George Allen & Unwin: London. Anindyo Roy, 2005. " Civility and Empire: Literature and Culture in British India, 1822-1922" Routledge.

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