



Empire and Progress: Tracing the Beneficial Outcomes of British rule in India

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ABSTRACT:

This research paper examines the positive outcomes of British rule in India by tracing the concept of “Empire and Progress.” While acknowledging the injustices and exploitative nature of imperialism, the study aims to shed light on the multifaceted impacts of British colonialism and explore the beneficial legacies that have endured in modern India. The paper delves into various dimensions, including administration, infrastructure development, education and knowledge, social reforms, legal systems. By providing a comprehensive analysis, the research aims to contribute to a balanced understanding of the complex relationship between British colonialism and its impacts on India.

Keywords: British, Christian Missionary, Railway, Roads, Irrigation, colonialism, etc.

Introduction:

The era of British colonial rule in India has been the subject of intense historical analysis and complex debates. While the narrative often highlights the injustices and exploitative nature of imperialism, it is essential to recognize that the British presence also brought about several positive transformations in the Indian subcontinent. This research paper aims to trace the beneficial outcomes of British rule on India by examining the concept of “Empire and Progress”.

Empire, in the context of British colonialism, represented the exercise of political and economic control over vast territories and populations. While it is undeniable that the British Empire pursued its own interests, it inadvertently set in motion a series of changes that led to progress in various spheres of Indian society. Through this study, we delve into the subtle impacts of British rule, shedding light on the positive legacies that have sustained in modern India.

One significant aspect to explore is the governance and administration introduced by the British. The British implemented a system of governance that introduced stability, structure, and efficiency to the Indian subcontinent. The establishment of centralized administrative bodies, such as the Indian Civil Service, introduced meritocracy, professionalism, and impartiality in the administration of justice and governance. These institutions laid the foundation for a modern bureaucratic system that continues to function in independent India, enabling effective governance and decision-making processes.

Furthermore, British colonialism played a crucial role in modernizing India's physical infrastructure. The construction of an extensive railway network, the introduction of telegraph and postal services, the development of ports and roads, facilitated trade, communication and movement of the people across the vast distances. These infrastructural advancements not only activated economic growth but also promoted social integration, transforming India into a more interconnected and accessible nation.

Education and knowledge were another area profoundly influenced by British rule. The British established educational institutions, including schools and universities, which introduced modern curriculum, scientific methods, and critical thinking. The spread of English education opened doors to new opportunities and helped bridge cultural divides within India. The educational reforms initiated by the British had a lasting impact on the intellectual and social development of Indian society, empowering individuals and shaping the future leaders of an independent nation.

In addition to these areas, the paper will explore other aspects such as economic reforms, legal systems, preservation of cultural heritage, and contributions to healthcare and medicine. By critically examining these various dimensions, we aim to provide a comprehensive understanding of the positive outcomes of British rule on India and challenge the conventional narrative that portrays colonialism solely as a tale of oppression and exploitation.

It is important to acknowledge that this research paper does not seek to justify or overlook the injustices and human suffering that occurred during the period of British colonialism. Instead, it seeks to present a balanced perspective by shedding light on the complexities of empire and progress. By tracing the beneficial outcomes of British rule in India, we aim to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of this significant chapter in history and its enduring impact on the Indian subcontinent.

Objectives of the Study:

1. To examine the impact of British colonialism on the development of physical infrastructure in India, such as the construction of railways, roads, ports, and communication networks.
2. To explore the influence of British educational reforms on India's intellectual and social development, including the spread of English education and the introduction of scientific methods.
3. To analyze the social reforms initiated by the British and their impact on trade, industry, and agricultural practices in India.
4. To investigate the positive contributions of British colonialism to India's legal system, including the establishment of courts, legal frameworks, and the introduction of modern legal principles.

By achieving these objectives, this study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the positive outcomes of British rule in India, thereby contributing to a nuanced perspective on the complex dynamics of empire and progress in the Indian subcontinent.

Modern Education

The British were more successful in the introduction of modern education. Though the spread of modern education was not solely the work of the government but the Christian missionaries and a large number of enlightened Indians also played an important role in this educational reform. Before the advent of the English, both the Hindus & the Muslims had their separate educational institutions. Education was based on religion. The Hindu educational system was based on caste system and lower castes were denied education. *Gurukul* and *Pathshala* were centers of education. Muslim children were given education in *Makhtab* and *Madrasa*. Education was denied to women in both the communities with an exception of few upper caste women.

Initially, the Christian missionaries spread-out the English knowledge & literature among the people by establishing schools at different places. Missionaries and their supporters began to exert pressure on the company to encourage and promote modern, secular, westernized education in India. A humble beginning was made in 1813, when the Charter Act incorporated the principle of encouraging learned Indians, and promoting the knowledge of modern sciences in the country. The Act directed the company to spend the sum of one lakh rupees for the purpose to educate Indians. For years, great controversy raged in country on the question of the direction that this expenditure should take. While one section of opinion wanted it to be spent inclusively for promotion of western studies, others desired that, emphasis should be placed on expansion of traditional Indian learning, medium of instruction also become the topic of controversy among those who wanted to spread western language. The two controversies were settled in 1835 when the Government of India decided to devote the limited resources it was willing to spare to the teaching of western sciences and literature through the medium of English language alone and opened a few English schools and colleges.²

During the period from 1854-1882 big strides were made in the field of secondary and higher education. In 1857 under the wood's dispatch proposals, the Universities of Calcutta, Bombay and Madras were started and regular scholarships were to be awarded to outstanding students. By 1882, sixty-eight colleges were opened.

The Dispatch of 1854 continued to be the basis of educational policy for India even after it was transferred to the Crown, and was confirmed by the Secretary of State in 1859. The importance of primary education was particularly emphasized and the Secretary of State suggested the levy of a special rate on land to provide adequate means for its promotion. The result was a rapid growth in the number of schools and colleges. Some of these were entirely financed by the Government, while others were managed by private bodies with or without a Government grant-in-aid.⁴

In 1882, a Commission was appointed under the chairmanship of Sir William Hunter to review the progress of education under the new policy, and its report was approved by the Government in 1884. The policy of 1854 was fully endorsed, but emphasis was laid upon the fact that primary education had not made sufficient progress. The report drew attention to the special and urgent need for the extension and improvement of the elementary education of the masses, and recommended that the primary schools should be managed by the newly established Municipal and District Boards under the supervision and control of the Government.⁴ The result was a steady increase in the number of schools and colleges.

The British rulers imparted western education in arts and sciences through the medium of English to the Indian people only to serve their own imperial needs. Nevertheless this liberal education became instrumental not only in our intellectual development but also in awakening our nationalist feelings and promoting the sense of unity among the Indian people. It was the western education that firmly rooted in our minds the ideals of freedom and nationalism and roused the desire to overthrow the yoke of the foreign rule & to gain freedom and the self-rule. To sum up, the English education proved much helpful in our religions, social and political progress.

Social Reforms

Indian society in the 19th century was caught in a vicious web created by religious superstitions and dogmas. All religions in general and Hinduism in particular had become a compound of magic, animism, and superstitions. Social conditions were equally depressing. The most distressing was the position of women. The birth of a girl was unwelcome, her marriage a burden and her widowhood inauspicious. Another debilitating factor was caste. It sought to maintain a system of segregation, hierarchically ordained on the basis of ritual status, hampering social mobility and fostered social divisions. The conquest of India by the British during the 18th and 19th century exposed some serious weaknesses and drawbacks of Indian social institutions. The response, indeed, was varied but the need to reform social and religious life was a commonly shared conviction. It also brought in completely new sets of ideas and social world.⁵

The exposure to post Enlightenment rationalism that came to signify modernity brought a change in the outlook of a select group of Indians. The introduction of western education and ideas had the far reaching impact on the Indian Society. Through the glasses of utility, reason, justice, and progress, a select group of individuals began to explore the nature of their own society. There was a gradual emergence of public opinion. The debates

between the Orientalist scholars of Eastern societies like India on one side, and the Utilitarian, Liberals and Missionaries on the other also enabled the penetration of ideas, at least amongst the upper section of society.²

The major social problems which came in the purview of the reforms movements were emancipation of women in which *Sati*, infanticide, child marriage and widow remarriage were taken up, castism and untouchability, education for bringing about enlightenment in society. Important characteristics of Social Reform Movement included leadership by wide emerging Intellectual middle class. Reform movement started in different parts of India in different period but having considerable similarities. Raja Rammohan Roy fought relentlessly against social evils like sati, polygamy, child marriage, female infanticide and caste discrimination. He organized a movement against the inhuman custom of sati and helped William Bentinck to pass a law banning the practice in 1829,² he made it a crime to associate in any way with the burning of a widow on her husband's pyre. It was the first successful social movement against an age old social evil.

Female infanticide, or the practice of killing female children at the time of their birth, had prevailed among some of the Rajput clans and other castes because of the paucity of young men who died in large numbers in warfare, and because of the difficulties of earning a livelihood in unfertile areas, and in parts of western and central India because of the prevalence of the evil custom of dowry in a virulent form. Regulations prohibiting infanticide had been passed in 1795 and 1802, but they were sternly enforced only by William Bentinck and Harding. In 1856, the Government of India passed an Act enabling Hindu widows to remarry.

The government acted after Pandit Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar and other reformers carried on a prolonged agitation in favour of the measure. Social Reform Movement are linked with different ideas including presence of colonial government, economic and social backwardness of society, influence of modern western ideas, rise of intellectual awakening in the middle class and poor position of women in society.

In a nutshell, it can be argued that in the evolution of modern India the reform movements have made very significant contribution. They stood for the democratization of the society, removal of superstitions and decadent customs, spread of enlightenment and development of a rational and modern outlook. This led to the national awakening in India. British rule in India acted as a catalyst to deep seated social changes. Western culture also influenced the Indian Life and thought in several ways. The most important result of the impact of western culture was the replacement of blind faith in current traditions⁶, beliefs, and conventions by a spirit of rationalism

Infrastructural Reforms

The claim that British rule was an agency of 'modernization' rests ultimately on facts like railways construction, the development of plantations, mines and factories through British capital and introduction of capitalist production relations and modern methods of banking and industrial management by whites.¹

1. RAILWAYS

The British introduced railways in India, revolutionizing transportation. The first railway line opened in 1853, connecting Bombay (Mumbai) and Thane. By 1880, India had around 9,500 miles of railway tracks. Railways played a crucial role in connecting different parts of the country and facilitating the movements of goods and people⁷ There was no doubt that the railways had made transport quicker and cheaper by around 1900.

The railways, it is important to highlight, were also a catalyst. That is, it pushed new kinds of industries into functioning and created new trade linkages, leading to new forms of work, which were embedded in older practices of industrial life. On the eve of independence, the railways were employing over 100,000 workers.³ Perhaps the most important of these 'linkage industries', as Hurd shows, was the coal industry.

Under the new guarantee system 1879-1900, most of the railways were acquired or purchased by the state on the expiry of respective period of contract with the companies concerned. However, the management was left to the companies, subject to government control, exercised through the Railway Board, which was created in 1905. During the period 1914-1921, there was a setback, partly due to wartime pressure on them and partly due to the decrease of the annual program of capital expenditure.

After the introduction of the reforms of 1919, a committee was appointed, with the late Sir William Acworth as its Chairman, to investigate into the working of the railways and recommend a suitable policy for their further development. The Committee recommended an expenditure of 150 crores of rupees every five years on improving the railways; and its majority report definitely favoured State management of the railways and construction of new lines by State agency. The Committee also recommended the creation of a new department of communications, reorganization of railway boards, establishment of a Railway Rates Tribunal, and separation of the railway budget from the general budget. It should be noted that Indian public opinion has always been opposed to company management of railways, not only because their profits thereby went out of India but also because the companies were considered to be unsympathetic towards Indian national interests. Though the Government of India did not definitely accept the recommendation of the majority report regarding the ending of company management, yet under the pressure of Indian opinion it ultimately took under its direct management the East Indian Railway (1st January, 1925), the Great Indian Peninsular Railway (30th June, 1926), the Burma railways (1st January, 1929) and the Southern Punjab Railway (1st January, 1930). The Government began to undertake all new construction of railways. The Railway Board was also reorganized. As constituted in 1936, it had the Chief Commissioner as President, the Financial Commissioner and three other members. The Rates Advisory Committee was created in 1926, and the Central Publicity Bureau of the Railway Board was started on the 1st April, 1927⁴

2. ROADS

Progressive decentralization, and the growth of local self-government, have afforded considerable stimulus to road development. More attention has also been recently paid to the need for co-ordination of rail-road transport, and this question was discussed in 1933 by a specially convened Road-Rail Conference at Shimla. A special Road Development Committee was appointed in 1927 to consider the road problems of India. In accordance with its recommendations, the import and excise duties on motor spirit were increased from four to six annas per gallon in March, 1929, the additional duty being earmarked for expenditure on road development; the Standing Committee of the Indian Legislature on Roads was created in the following April; and the All-India Road Conferences began to be convened from time to time⁴

3. IRRIGATION

Irrigation works have a special importance in an agricultural country like India, where the rainfall is unequally distributed throughout the seasons and is

liable to failure or serious deficiency. The famines of 1896 and 1901 clearly showed the need and importance of protective irrigation works. Lord Curzon appointed a Commission on Irrigation in 1901, which submitted its report in 1903. A new chapter in the irrigation policy of the Government was opened by the recommendations of this Commission. Among other things, it specially recommended the possible extension of the scope of productive, especially protective irrigation works for the Deccan districts of Bombay, Madras, the Central Provinces and Bundelkhand. It sketched out a rough program of irrigation works for the next twenty years, adding 6^{1/2} million acres to the irrigated area at an estimated cost of £30,000,000. There are three classes of irrigation works in India: (i) Wells, (ii) Tanks, and (iii) Canals. The canals are of three kinds; (a) Perennial canals, (b) Inundation canals, and (c) Storage works. Since 1921 irrigation works have been classified under two main heads: (i) Productive, and (ii) Unproductive, with a third class covering areas irrigated by non-capital works.⁴

After the reforms of 1919, irrigation became a Provincial subject. The Provincial Governments have shown much activity regarding irrigation works, and the important measures that have been undertaken in this direction, are : (i) The Sutlej Valley project in the Punjab, completed in 1933, (ii) the Sukkur Barrage in Sind, completed in 1932, (iii) the Kaveri Reservoir and Mettur project, completed in 1934, (iv) the Nizamsagar project, completed in 1934, (v) the Sarda-Oudh canals in the United Provinces, and (vi) the Lloyd Dam in Bombay, completed in 1926, which is one of largest masses of masonry in the world.⁴

The Co-Operative Movement

Frederick Nicholson, a Madras civilian, first suggested in his Report (1892) to the Madras Government the introduction of co-operative credit societies in India. In 1901 the Government of India appointed a Committee to consider the question of the establishment of agricultural banks in India, and after the Committee submitted its report, the Co-operative Credit Societies Act was passed by the Imperial Legislative Council in 1904. It provided for the starting of rural as well as urban credit societies. Thus the Co-operative Movement was inaugurated in India on the 24th March, 1904. The movement showed remarkable progress in every Province within a few years. It received a fresh impetus by the Amending Act of 1912, which granted recognition to non-credit societies, central financing societies, and unions. The Maclagan Committee (1914-1915) made some valuable recommendations for the organisation of co-operative finance. After the reforms of 1919, co-operation became a Provincial subject and the local governments were left free to adapt the Act of 1912 to their own requirements. There are three parts in the financial structure of the Co-operative Movement; (i) The Agricultural Credit Society, (ii) Central Financing Agencies, and (iii) Provincial Co-operative Banks. The question of the relief of old debts of agriculturists, through long-term credit, led to the establishment of a special type of bank, known as the Land Mortgage Bank, in some Provinces.⁴

In spite of all that has been done, the poverty and indebtedness of the Indian masses are still appalling problems in Indian economic life, like the problem of unemployment among the middle classes (into which investigations were carried on by specially appointed committees, the most important being the Sapru Committee which submitted its report in 1935), in some Provinces like Bengal, Madras, Bombay, the Punjab, U.P. and Bihar, and in some of the Indian States. The solution of these problems is vitally necessary, though the stupendous and perplexing character of the task cannot be denied.⁴

Famine Relief Reforms

Famine relief policies and reforms were an important aspect of British governance in response to recurring famines in India. These efforts aimed to alleviate the suffering of affected populations and mitigate the impact of famines.

Perhaps the most important achievement of Indian administration during the period under review was the formation of a definite system of famine relief. In an agricultural country like India, famine must have proved a great scourge to its people from times immemorial. With the growth of population and the diminution of industrial activity, the periodical famines assumed more threatening proportions. A terrible famine broke out in Bengal in 1770 and nearly one-third of the population fell victims to it. During the next century famines occurred in different parts of India. The year 1866-1867 witnessed a severe famine which took a heavy toll of human lives in Orissa, and spread all along the eastern coast from Calcutta to Madras. During the next ten years there were local famines in the United Provinces, the Punjab and Rajputana in 1868-1869, and in Northern Bihar in 1873.

The Governor-General Lord Lytton, rightly held that it was necessary to formulate general principles of famine relief, and appointed a strong Commission under General Sir Richard Strachey for this purpose. The Commission reported in 1880, and its recommendations formed the basis of the Famine Code promulgated in 1883 by the Government of India, and of the various provincial famine codes prepared in following years. The Commission started with the fundamental principle that it is the duty of the State to offer relief to the needy in times of famine. The relief was to be administered in the shape of providing work for able-bodied men and distributing food or money to the aged and infirm. For the first, schemes of relief- work should be prepared in advance, so that actual operations may begin immediately after famine breaks out. These works should be of permanent utility, and on an extensive scale, so as to give employment to a large number of persons. Local works, such as excavation of ponds or raising embankments, etc., in villages might also be undertaken for the employment of persons who were not fit to be sent out on larger works. It was specially emphasized that the people should be provided with work before their physical efficiency had deteriorated through starvation.

Reference has also been made to the subsequent famines, in 1896-97 and again in 1899-1900, and the Commissions appointed on both these occasions. The last Commission, with Sir Antony MacDonnell as its President, which reported in 1901, stressed the need for "moral strategy" or "putting heart into the people", that is, helping the people with loans and other means, as soon as there is any sign of danger, by timely and liberal grants of takkavi loans, by the suspension of land revenue, by being watchful about the signs of approaching calamity, by organizing private charity and by enlisting non-official support. Side by side with the growth of the machinery for famine relief has developed the policy of famine prevention through railway and irrigation works and improvement of agriculture and industries. Under the financial decentralization rules of the Government of India Act, 1919, each Provincial Government (except Burma, which is now separated from India and Assam) was required to contribute every year, out of its resources, a definite sum for expenditure on famine. These annual assignments from the revenues of the Provinces were to be spent on relief of famine only, the

term "Famine" covering famines caused by drought or other natural calamities.⁴

Legal and Judicial Reforms

1. THE RULE OF LAW

The British introduced the modern concept of rule of law. This meant that their administration was to be carried out, at least in theory, in obedience to laws, which clearly defined the rights, privileges and obligations of the subjects, and not according to the caprice or personal discretion of the ruler. The rule of law was to some extent a guarantee of the personal liberty of a person. It is true that previous rulers of India had been in general bound by tradition and custom. But they always had the legal right to take any administrative steps they wanted and there existed no other authority before whom their acts could be questioned. The Indian rulers and chiefs sometimes exercised this power to do as they wanted. Under British rule, on the other hand, administration was largely carried on according to laws as interpreted by the courts, though the laws themselves were often defective, were made not by people through a democratic process but autocratically by the foreign rulers, and left a great deal of power in the hands of civil servants and the police. But that was perhaps inevitable in a foreign regime that could not in the very nature of things be democratic or libertarian.

2. EQUALITY BEFORE LAW

The Indian legal system under the British was based on the concept of equality before law. This meant that in the eyes of the law, all men were equal. The same law applied to all persons irrespective of their caste, religion, or class. Previously, the judicial system had paid heed to caste distinctions and had differentiated between the so-called high-born and low-born. For the same crime, lighter punishment was awarded to a Brahmin than to a non-Brahmin. Similarly, in practice zamindars and nobles were not judged as harshly as the commoner. In fact, very often they could not be brought to justice at all for their actions. Now the humble could also move the machinery of justice.

There was, however, one exception to this excellent principle of equality before law. The Europeans and their descendants had separate courts and even laws. In criminal cases, they could be tried only by European judges. Many English officials, military officers, planters and merchants behaved with Indians in a haughty, harsh, and even brutal manner. When efforts were made to bring them to justice, they were given indirect and undue protection, and consequently light or no punishment, by many of the European judges before whom alone they could be tried. Consequently, there was frequent miscarriage of justice.

In practice, there emerged another type of legal inequality. Justice became quite expensive as court fees had to be paid, lawyers engaged, and the expenses of witnesses met. Courts were often situated in distant towns. Lawsuits dragged on for years. The complicated laws were beyond the grasp of the illiterate and ignorant peasants.

3. JUDICIARY

The British laid the foundations of a new system of dispensing justice through a hierarchy of civil and criminal courts. Although it was started by Warren Hastings, the system was stabilized by Cornwallis in 1793. In each district was established a *Diwani Adalat* or civil court, presided over by the District judge who belonged to the Civil Service. Cornwallis thus separated the posts of the civil judge and the Collector. Appeal from the district court lay first to four provincial courts of civil appeal and then, finally, to the *Sadar Diwani Adalat*. Below the district courts were the registrar's courts, headed by Europeans, and a number of subordinate courts headed by Indian judges known as *Munsifs* and *Amins*. To deal with criminal cases, Cornwallis divided the Presidency of Bengal into four divisions, in each of which a court of circuit presided over by the civil servants was established. Below these courts came a large number of Indian magistrates to try petty cases. Appeals from the courts of circuit lay with the *Sadar Nizamat Adalat*. The criminal courts applied Muslims Criminal Law in a modified and less harsh form so that the tearing apart of limbs and such other punishments were prohibited. The civil courts applied the customary law that had prevailed in any area or among a section of the people since time immemorial. In 1831, William Bentinck abolished the provincial courts of Appeal and Circuit. Their work was assigned first to commissions and later to District Judges and District Collectors. Bentinck also raised the status and powers of Indians in the judicial service and appointed them as deputy magistrates, subordinate judges and Principal *Sadar Amins*. In 1865, High Courts were established at Calcutta, Madras and Bombay to replace the *Sadar Courts of Diwani* and *Nizamat*.²

The British also established a new system of laws through the processes of enactment and codification of old laws. The traditional system in India had been largely based on customary law which arose from long tradition and practice, though many laws were based on the *Shastras* and *Shariat* as well as on imperial authority. Though they continued to observe customary law in general, the British gradually evolved a new system of laws. They introduced regulations, codified the existing laws, and often systematized and modernized them through judicial interpretation.

In 1833, the government appointed a Law Commission headed by Lord Macaulay to codify Indian laws. Its labours eventually resulted in the Indian Penal Code, the Western-derived Codes of Civil and Criminal Procedure and other codes of laws. The same law is now prevailed over the other country and they were enforced by a uniform system of courts. Thus, may be said that India was judicially unified.

Conclusions

In conclusion, the research paper has explored the beneficial outcomes of British rule in India, while also acknowledging the need for a critical evaluation of these effects. The British administration brought about significant economic developments through the introduction of famine relief features, infrastructure advancements, and the establishment of a market economy. Infrastructure projects, such as railways and irrigation systems, improved transportation and facilitated economic growth. Social reforms aimed to uplift deteriorating conditions of women of the country. The spread of education, although limited, played a role in social reform and the emergence of an educated class.

However, it is important to recognize that these positive outcomes were often intertwined with the underlying motives of colonial exploitation and control. The benefits of British rule were not evenly distributed, and the exploitative nature of colonialism cannot be ignored, as it resulted in the extraction of resources, economic exploitation, and the perpetuation of social inequalities.

Therefore, an effective understanding of the impact of British rule on India requires acknowledging both the positive developments and the underlying

exploitative dynamics. The research highlights the complexities of colonial governance and its legacies, urging a comprehensive analysis that considers the multidimensional effects of British rule. Ultimately, the evaluation of the beneficial outcomes of British rule in India serves as a reminder of the complex nature of colonialism and its long-lasting impacts on post-colonial societies.

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