

# The Impacts of Colonial British Raj in Contemporary India

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It is after the decline of the Mughal Dynasty, that the British East India Company began to influence its rule in the Indian subcontinent. Gradually, India came under the direct rule of the British administration based in London and was declared a British colony. Colonialism in India is marked as one of the most 'traumatic' historical events even today. Indians majorly criticize the British rule as an era that exaggerated the suffering of lives, poverty, economic exploitation, social upheaval, communal divisions, and political disturbance to the Indian population. These factors which were intensified during the British administration still continue to impact the contemporary Indian framework in one or many ways. It is due to these facets that after seventy-three years of its Independence, the socio-political considerations are still manipulated by the domains of division. Various segments of the Indian society served with the British administration under varying hierarchical segments, while some were privileged (especially the royal class), the majority had to face suppression and exploitation. Today, after seven decades of gaining Independence, the nation still faces a lot of challenges to maintain the balance of being a perfect society for its people. While the Indian scholars blame the British rulers and their policies to term the colonial period as a 'dark age' for the Indian land, many cite the merits of the British rule. Therefore, this article will explain the impacts of the British Raj in India and the many ways it still continues to indirectly impact Indian society. Lastly, this article will narrate; how features of British colonialism imprints contemporary Indian society in many subsequent domains?

*Keywords: British empire, colonialism, social transformation, Indonesia, India*

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It was after the decline of the Mughal Dynasty; that the British East India Company began to extend its rule into the Indian subcontinent. Gradually, India came under the direct rule of the British administration based in London and was declared a British colony. The British administration lasted from 1858 to 1947 and played an important role in transforming the social, political, and geographical dimensions of the country to a great extent. After years of struggle in the form of movements and protests, India gained independence from what was popularly known as the British Raj in the year 1947. The history of being a British colony implies a considerable impact on the contemporary Indian context. Colonialism in India was marked as one of the most 'traumatic' historical events, and this belief prevails even today. Indians majorly criticize the British rule as an era that exaggerated the suffering of lives, poverty, economic exploitation, social upheaval, communal divisions, and political disturbance to the Indian population. These factors which were intensified during the British administration still continue to impact the contemporary Indian

framework in one or many ways. It is due to these facets that after seventy-three years of its Independence, the socio-political considerations are still manipulated by the domains of division.

The Indian scholars majorly criticize the British Empire and their policies and argue against the concept of 'dark age' that was theorized to describe the subcontinent, prior to the British influence. Therefore, this article tries to reflect: *how features of British colonialism imprints contemporary Indian society in many subsequent domains?* Several scholars present distinct views and ideas regarding its historical past and the pros and cons faced by India and its population as an English colony. While many historians are of the view that Indians were greatly oppressed by the British officials, these scholars believe that only the privileged and the proven loyal were the ones to benefit from the British crown while the majority of the Indians were left poor, exploited and helpless.

Interestingly, some scholars signify the merits of the British imperialism and argue that the British Empire helped to develop the Indian economy, better administered the diverse society, and gained India a position in world politics. The most popular example used to support this argument is the building of Indian railways and the usage of English dialect. Subsequently, many more either agree or disagree with the two sides of the argument. Though, the Indian society does not really hold a unified history; the society was largely divided as kingdoms under regional kings in the form of rulers. Therefore, the form of nationalism was very distinct from the way it is today; the societal and national code of conduct has been changed. And these transformations and historical conducts have brought mixed consequences for the Indian society from the political perspective.

In contemporary Indian society, the majority of the Indian population considers British colonial rule as the foremost cause of India's rising economic gap within its population structure. It is believed that the admission and policies of the alien influences in the form of merchants and traders led to the destruction of Indian resources and its wholesome economic structure. Lewis and Dutt (1962) citing the views of some Indian nationalists, like Nehru (the first Prime Minister of India, post-independence), shows the exploiting and vulnerable state policies adopted by the British officials in India. Nehru argued the British rulers as the cause behind India's huge population structure being sunk under utmost poverty and vulnerable condition, even after several years of independence. The authors argue that India as a British colony, served for the betterment of Great Britain, while the Indian progress was greatly neglected. Thus, the memories of the colonial past are being refreshed from time to time by the Indian government to convey and remind the 'national identity' of being an Indian to the whole Indian population; irrespective of their caste, creed, religion, and ethnicity. However, the practice of complicated bureaucratic activities is still seen intact in the contemporary administrative domains.

The next crucial policy manifested during the British colonial rule was the infamous 'divide and rule policy'. Interestingly, Misra (1999) provides a brief explanation of the 'divide and rule concept' that was employed by the British rulers to effectively administer a complex society like India. It was apparent to the British officials that it would be impossible to rule a country as big as India housing a mass, diverse population. It would be impossible to manipulate if its *people* remain united and structured. Therefore, the 'diversity' of the Indian population was used to fragment the whole country. The religious, caste and class factors were foreplayed to broaden the divisions and provoke them against one another. The author pointed out that British officers were appointed as 'managing agents' in every Indian province to manage and govern the traditional Indians; therefore, the most effective way was to create a never-ending misunderstanding among the various ethnic

communities. People were divided based on caste, class, religion, and ethnicity. Since a large portion of the medieval population was composed of uneducated farmers, the British officials could easily manipulate them with their dividing strategies. Misra also points, the British government was well aware that the growing friendliness among Indians would become a *threat* for the foreign ruling empire and this led to division and fragmentation of Indians by the British rulers, but only a few educated Indians working closely with the British rulers were able to understand the ruling strategies.

Today, the Indians remember this ruling policy as one of the destructing mechanisms for Indians to be extremely disunited, which helped an alien power to rule with much ease and confidence. For instance, the Indian filmmaking industry often promotes the message to remain united as an 'Indian' irrespective of one's religion, ethnicity, race, and culture. On many occasions, biographical films of martyred soldiers and historical heroes of all religions are portrayed to describe the unity of the Indian population and the friendship between Hindus, Muslims, Christians, etc. in the past, which was mis-interpreted during the British colonial rule. Ironically, the concept of 'divide and rule' still persists in the political domain of contemporary Indian society. The struggle for political dividends enables a sensitive discourse of division and upheaval in the modern nation-states. This is perhaps the reason that communal and racial violence is a common scenario in present day India. The most recorded struggles are between the Hindus and the Muslims. Even though the presence of the Muslim community as the largest religious minorities has been a fact since India's independence; Hindu-Muslim clashes are contemporary instances of sectarianism in India.

The Partition of India and Pakistan was the ultimate outcome of the 'divide and rule policy' that was employed by the British rulers in India. The British authority made sure that India could no longer stay united after gaining independence from British rule. Thus, east and west Pakistan, presently known as 'Bangladesh' and 'Pakistan' were carved out of the Indian territory. Today, India does not share a friendly and peaceful political relation with both of these neighbors due to several reasons. It is crucial to note that these countries were divided from India based on religious grounds. Even after seven decades of partition and colonial freedom, it is still difficult to remember the havoc and destruction that was caused during the time of partition. Destruction in the form of mass killings, rape, murders, looting, and burning of properties and possessions; all done in the name of religion. India and Pakistan had three major wars in the years 1965, 1971, and 1999, and several conflicts from time to time. These wars and conflicts were mainly over the question of 'Kashmir'[1], and to prove the superiority of one nation over another.

Moreover, India has been facing the problem of illegal immigration from Bangladesh since 1971, and this phenomenon has been considered a serious threat in the present times by Indian political powers, scholars, social scientists, and the media. Especially in eastern India (around 90%) of immigrants are Bangladeshi Muslims. These immigrants are mostly discriminated against by the locals on ethno-cultural grounds. The natives of India are threatened and disturbed by the increasing number of immigrants and the encroaching of the agricultural land by Bangladeshi farmers and laborers. The Bangladeshi immigrants are termed as 'illegal' and considered to form the 'illegitimate' vote bank in the Indian democratic elections.

Protests against the political parties are being carried out from time to time for manipulating the role of these Bangladeshi migrants within the Indian democracy. For instance, a significantly large communal riot was recorded in north-eastern India in 1979-1985. This movement is known as the 'Assam Movement' (since it started in the state of Assam); the causes of the Assam Movement later

culminated over other states in India. The student's organization became aware of the politicizing role of the illegal immigrants (mostly Bengali speaking Muslims) by the state governments. But, the pressure erupted by this movement compelled the then Assam Government to work in action, since Assam held the highest number of illegal immigrants in the whole of Northeast India. This was followed by imprisoning some illegal immigrants, irrespective of their religion, based on possession of basic documents. Recently, two massive communal riots took place in July 2012 and May 2014, which marked the intensity of the religious violence the region is going through. These were triggered with locals believing that the Indian Muslims (i.e. those residing in India since the time of its partition) have been supporting the immigration of illegal Bangladeshi Muslims, in order to create a religious homogenous culture and to, therefore, promote 'Islamization'. All these instances reflected the vulnerability of the society for religious and ethnic conflicts that might erupt at any giving time.

Surprisingly, anonymous men in the form of mobs are found to indulge in promoting these brutal riots. Where do these people come from? This question starts another blame game between political parties when one party blames the other for being guilty of employing 'goons' to kill innocent lives and thus defame the opponents. It is apparently much convenient for powerful political players to term these anonymous men as 'insurgents' carrying out violent activities to attain their desired goal. It is very clear that 'communalism' is not just a situation that has been rising due to the hatred against the growing number of immigrants in India. But, it is a part of the historical communal divide and rule policy that was introduced by the British rulers to divide India at one point in time.



"Colors Clashing in Shri Dauji Temple, Chhabria Uttar Pradesh India" by AdamCohn is licensed under CC BY-NC-ND 2.0

Due to the decline of the Mughal Empire, many European scholars describe the 18th century in India as a 'dark age' for the country. For instance, James Mills has said that India during this time was struggling to safeguard its existence. While many others cited that India has experienced its lowest political and economic crisis during this time. However, this argument was challenged by another group of scholars like Satish Chandra and Athar Ali; they pointed that this century was a period of transition from 'medieval' to the 'modern' times. Moreover, it also witnessed the emergence of regional powers and states within the Indian land.

It is of no doubt that the British East India Company entered India with the sole intention of extending economic activities and gaining financial benefits in the name of the business. Gradually, the shifting of political power to the British crown made the economic arrangements in total favor of the British side. India was an agricultural country with rich natural resources and favorable climatic conditions, that proved beneficial for the economic development of its people. It is also rich in natural mineral resources and precious metal. The Indian economy was considered as one of the most developed and stable economies during the medieval times. After around 200 years of rule, the British Raj almost destructed the native agricultural economy of India by introducing the most complicated economic methods to the Indian economy that proved biased and unequal for the Indian side.

Among several others, the land revenue systems introduced during the British colonial rule were one of the crucial reasons for the economic decline in India. British officials like Lord Cornwallis, Thomas Munro, Captain Reed and Warren Hastings introduced several land revenue practices to the farmers in India. The farmers, mostly uneducated formed an important community that contributed to the economic growth during the medieval times, were targeted by the British government. The farmers were forced and regulated to pay higher taxes to the state for their own land. The British government also made several revisions to upgrade the Indian agriculture, to create a more fulfilling market space that could satisfy the demand for British supplies.

Various segments of the Indian society served with and under the British officers, while some were privileged (especially the royal class), the majority had to face the suppression and exploitation. Apart from the economic cause, the ruling strategies employed by the British government has been constantly used as a 'tool' to arouse nationalism among the common Indians since independence till the present. Indian writers like Shashi Tharoor highlights the British colonial era and its destructive policies that literally damaged India. Among others, the partition of India on religious division is something that still continues to 'haunt' the country from time to time.

### Notes

[1] It is the northernmost region of India, popularly named as Jammu and Kashmir. It is also called a 'conflict' region, due to the territorial conflict that continues to exist between India and Pakistan, where China also played a role during several occasions.