

The Creative Launcher

URL: <https://www.thecreativelauncher.com>

ISSN: 2455-6580

Vol. 6 & Issue 5, (December, 2021)

Publisher: Perception Publishing

Published on 30th December, 2021

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The Implications of British Colonial Domination on the Indian Cultural Ethos

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.53032/tcl.2021.6.5.13>

Pages: 108-116

Abstract

As Indians, we invariably disremember the impact of colonial rule on our ongoing lives and outlook. The British Colonial influence successfully altered our perception of ourselves. It deprived us of the self-assurance which otherwise is overwhelmingly present in the populace which subscribes to an illustrious past. The British attacked at the core of our belief system, our sense of self-sufficiency and self-reliance. This paper aims to discuss the systematic manner in which the representatives like Thomas Babington Macaulay of the British Raj carried out their strategy of dispatching Indian knowledge and traditions to oblivion to create an impression of British pre-eminence by creating an augmented reality. The paper aims to bring forth the relevance and urgent need to revive and instill national and cultural self-esteem amongst us as Indians.

Keywords: British Colonial Design in India, Indian culture, Indian heritage, Indian ethos, Colonial India

I

Introduction: The Glorious Indian Heritage

The cultural legacy of India emanates from its five-thousand-year-old elegance and enhancement. It goes without saying that this cultural heritage has had a profound influence on the global cultural panorama. People from diverse communities, expressing in distinctive languages, consuming a variety of nourishments, and carrying out different rituals amicably co-occur in harmony in India, as epitomized by the Indian ‘*Sanskriti*.’ Consequently, India's cultural heritage is defined by its diverse array of faiths, traditions, customs, and beliefs. Moreover, India has evolved various forms of art, architecture, and ideas through the years, and this richness has made Indian culture unrivaled, to which almost everyone still gazes. Thus, India's cultural heritage continues to thrive, retaining its original characteristics while adapting to changes, an attribute that remains a primary source of its resilience.

Prevailing Indian ethos is an upshot of interaction and intricate blend of historical mores, colonial stimuli throughout spans, and inculcation of existing Western culture. Western writers recurrently overlook key facets of Indian ethos and customs and their multiplicity. In their standardized renderings of India, the deep-seated conglomeration of Indian traditions in distinctive expanses of India is lost. Monuments and art assemblages are not the sole instances of heritage. Intoned traditions, performing arts, religious and cultural commemorations, and traditional artistries are illustrations of living expressions inherited from predecessors and conceded to posterities. Since it is a crucial element in maintaining cultural diversity in the face of mounting globalization, this indescribable cultural heritage is subtle and compels protection and understanding. It has been dynamic and inclusive because it promotes societal solidity, fosters a sense of belonging, and helps preserve group identities. Its cultural pluralism is embedded in a web of interconnectedness. A single religion or culture can't survive exclusively. Today India is a vast and vital nation, a large industrial economy with geostrategic significance. Cosmopolitan urban India and traditional rural India strive simultaneously to build a bright future.

It is known to all that the extraordinary history of India is inextricably linked to its geography. Despite its natural exclusion and alluring religions, it has always been an aggressor's bliss. These intrusions have empowered it to adapt to and absorb numerous people who have permeated its mountainous terrain and passes. No matter how many Persians, Greeks, Arabs, Portuguese, French, British, and other raiders decimated the land, local kings and kingdoms invariably survived, living out their conquest and collapse sagas. All through this phase, these local dynasties were building on the foundations of a culture that existed since the genesis of the Indian civilization. In the words of Swami Vivekanand:

History itself bears testimony to the fact. All the soul-elevating ideas and the different branches of knowledge that exist in the world are found on a proper investigation to have their roots in India. (qtd. in “Shri. Priya Nath Sinha”)

II

British Colonization of India before 1857

England established the East India Company in 1600 to control trade with India. The East India Company established a factory at Surat in 1610. This tiny base marked the commencement of a peculiar presence that would last over three hundred years and eventually dominate the entire subcontinent. According to the American historian Will Durant:

The British conquest of India was the invasion and destruction of a high civilization by a trading company [the British East India Company] utterly without scruple or principle, careless of art and greedy of gain, over-running with fire and sword a country temporarily disordered and helpless, bribing or murdering, annexing and stealing, and beginning that career of illegal and 'legal' plunder which has now [1930] gone on ruthlessly for one hundred and seventy-three years. (qtd. in Tharoor's *Inglorious Empire* 38)

The battles of Plassey (1757) and Buxar (1764) laid the basis for the British conquest of India. Victory in various wars helped solidify the British position. However, many native states fell under British control due to the Doctrine of Lapse and Subsidiary Alliance systems. Lord Wellesley, the Governor-General (1798-1805), used the Subsidiary Alliance System as a "Non-Intervention Policy" to establish the British Empire in India. Every ruler in India was required to pay a subsidy to the British for the upkeep of the British army. The British promised to protect them from their enemies in exchange, offering the British with opportunity for enormous expansion.

Similarly, to address the succession problem of Hindu states, Lord Dalhousie devised and implemented the Doctrine of Lapse. The policy stated that a ruler who had accepted or was in an alliance with the Britishers would lose his territory if he died without an heir. It also said that Britishers would decide whether or not the ruler was competent, and if not, his territory would be taken away. Such policies overthrew India's long-held 'hereditary' succession policy as the sole criterion for throne succession. Thus, the Doctrine of Lapse was an essential and implicit question that stimulated the revolt of 1857.

In opposition to British rule, the Indian Revolt of 1857 brought together people of various ethnic, religious, and social backgrounds. The revolt brought the East India Company's hegemony to an end. British rule had a significant impact on Indian society, economy, and culture between 1757 and 1857. A merchant, a ruler, and a Christian missionary were among the British government's errands in India. Initially, due to the threat of revolt, the British East India Company maintained a policy of non-interference in religious and educational matters of India. Charles Grant, a British East India Company junior officer, believed that the British could establish absolute hegemony in India by demonstrating the West's higher ethical values based on Christian heritage. He asserted that religious ideas were entrenching people's ignorance in India and that it could be changed by spreading Christian traditions. As a result, he sought the Company's official approval before beginning his missionary work. The Charter Act of 1813 was finally enacted by the British Parliament. It stipulated that permission would be granted to Missionaries who wanted to preach religion in India. The Charter of 1833 made

provisions for the permanent presence of missionaries in India. Since then, the colonial rulers and missionaries protected and promoted each other with a renewed zeal.

The British rule provided the missionaries with a favorable atmosphere and infrastructure to work. In India, they prompted social and legal reforms. As a result, William Bentick issued a resolution in 1835 to promote European studies while also allocating funds to English education. It was admitted that studying Indian and Oriental works was in vain. Customs, traditions, and religious beliefs were thought to be pointless. The introduction of English education was the only solution. Alexander Duff, a Scottish missionary, was tasked with putting an end to idol worship and obscurantism. It gained more converts as a result of mass movements among the social and economic classes most affected by the existing social and economic order. They were unable to comprehend other cultures and religions due to their belief in European Civilization's supremacy. Their presence, on the other hand, sparked a spate of social movements that ultimately led to social reforms in India. Mass Hindu conversions shattered Native Indians' soul and self-respect, resulting in the deterioration of Indian culture. Subsequently, an education policy was construed for India in such a fashion that would lure Indians to engage as clerks for low wages in addition to creating a class of Indians who were loyal to the British, applauded their culture, and connived to increase market share for British goods.

Educational institutions aiming to brainwash the minds of children and instil a feeling of subordination and superior British presence on the Indian subcontinent were formed to spread the so-called modern rational education. The colonists wanted to educate the Indians just enough to work for their requirements. They did not encourage an analytical thought process. Indians were made to believe about their primitivity and ignorance, whereas India had been a glorious civilization with the values of nonviolent co-existence and cultural pluralism. Despite being a seat of glorious achievements in knowledge, architecture, and arts, India was reverted to being a poor importer due to ruthless economic exploitation. English were ruling us with guns. Everybody wore Indian clothes and bought Indian textiles. The truth remains that the Europeans ruled us with their might. Before colonization, the Europeans spent sixty percent of their wealth buying Indian textiles. The Britishers, as rulers in India, made a systematic effort to destroy Indian textiles. They made a law that it could be sold only to the East India Company. Indian export of clothes came down. All industry was destroyed, and most of the Indian population fell back on agriculture for subsistence.

We have suffered as a country as a result of self-criticism, which began with modern-day education. More drastic changes are required in the British-created educational system. There is a need for a complete transformation of the educational concept. In the future, intellectual ability and sharpness of interpretation will be more valuable than memory strength. As a result, education should not be designed to produce elites. The British education system was designed to instil the value of obedience rather than promote intelligence.

Winston Churchill's often expressed quote depicts the colonial mindset:

I hate Indians. They are a beastly people with a beastly religion . . . Let the Viceroy sit on the back of a giant elephant and trample Gandhi into the dirt. (qtd. in Tharoor's *An Era of Darkness* 358)

India gained independence in 1947 but at a significant cost leading to the partition of the country. Britain also aided in the solidification and perpetuation of the iniquities of the caste system in India. In addition, religion was used to divide and rule, fostering a two-nation theory that eventually divided the country and made partition inevitable; one million people were killed, and seventeen million were displaced during the partition. (Bacchetta 566)

Nonetheless, Indian youth need to acknowledge the fact that the decades of self-abnegation has not aided progress. So perhaps now is the time to bolster our self-confidence.

III

Attempts to subdue Indian Ethos and Culture

(i) Lord Thomas Babington Macaulay (1800-1859)

From the early 19th century, the British approach vis-à-vis its colonies was of racial supremacy. Moreover, Lord Thomas Babington Macaulay (1800-1859), advisor to British Governor-General in India, unequivocally believed it was the earnest British duty to edify the populaces who lived in perpetual darkness outside Europe. Lord Macaulay arrived in India on June 1834. He was a law member of the Governor General's Executive Council and was named as the President of the Committee of Public Instruction (Ghosh 17). In 1835, he was given the responsibility of settling disputes between Orientalists and Anglicists. In February 1835, he submitted his famous Minutes to the Council, which Lord Bentinck approved in March 1835.

Thus, Macaulay proposed his Minutes on Education. This treatise outlined why the East India Company and the British government should invest in English language education and promote European learning in India. While the Minutes acknowledged Sanskrit and Arabic literature's historical importance in the Subcontinent, it also claimed that they had limitations (Kumar). In the *Minutes*, Macaulay wrote, "A single shelf of a good European library was worth the entire native literature of India and Arabia" (Diamond 75). He further emphasized that:

- The British government's primary goal should be to promote European literature and Science among Indians and that "all funds appropriated for education would be best employed on English education alone." ("Macaulay's Minutes")
- The Government Funds were not to be spent on printing oriental works.
- All the funds at the Government's disposal would henceforth be spent in imparting to Indians a knowledge of English literature and Science. ("Macaulay's Minutes")

The Minutes became policy when William Bentinck, the Governor-General of India, validated the resolution a month after it was submitted (Kumar). It was a triumph for Thomas Macaulay. He had defeated his adversaries, especially the Orientalists – East India Company

officials, scholars, translators, and collectors – who championed the process of learning and teaching Sanskrit, Arabic, and Persian in India.

Anglicists, including Macaulay, advocated for "filtration" of education while fervently promoting English. It meant that only those in the higher echelons would be taught English, but they would be expected to teach natives who were lower on the social ladder. According to Macaulay's Minutes, education aimed to "form a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern; a class of persons, Indian in blood and color, but English in taste, opinions, morals, and intellect." (Kaiwar 32). In October 1844, Lord Hardinge, the Governor-General of India, approved a resolution stating that all government appointments in India should be prioritized and granted to English-speaking individuals. This condition impacted Indian culture while considerably boosting English education in India.

Governor-General of India passed a resolution that all government appointments in India should prefer English-speaking people. This condition hampered the Indian culture and significantly promoted English education in India. The 1857 revolt resulted in a more effective centralization of education and the application of British politician Charles Wood's 1854 dispatch. The dispatch developed the modern three-tier educational system, with instruction in native languages at the primary levels and a greater emphasis on English at the higher levels, particularly at universities. Consequently, the three-tier educational system that we know today was born. Every Indian must read these documents and see how the education system was intentionally manipulated to serve a specific purpose.

(ii) Monier Williams (1819-1899)

Monier Williams (1819-1899), the Oriental Scholar, taught Native languages at the East India Company College from 1844 to 1858, until the company's rule in India ended soon after the 1857 revolt. After being appointed to the Boden Chair of Sanskrit at Oxford University, Monier Williams declared that one of the goals of orientalist scholarship should be the conversion of India to Christianity. Through the Preface to the Second edition of *Indian Wisdom* (1875), Monier Williams elaborates on the need to understand the Indian mind and all that belongs to Indian culture.

Imbued with the conciliatory spirit which a study must impart, all Englishmen-whether resident in England or India, whether clergymen or laymen-may aid the cause of Christianity and good government ...A great Eastern empire has been entrusted to our rule, not to be the *Corpus vile* of political and social experiments, nor yet for the sole purpose of extending our commerce, flattering our pride, or increasing our prestige, but that a benighted population may be enlightened, and every man, woman, and child ... hear the glad tidings of the Gospel. (Thomas 74)

Monier Williams was firmly committed to the Christianization of India, and he saw the study of Sanskrit as a vehicle for such a plan. A detailed study of Hindu and Indian Culture was part of this agenda. He saw his job as one of teaching Sanskrit to prospective missionaries enabling them to convert natives of India to Christianity and to others who intended to work in India (Thomas 74). His significant work includes a Sanskrit dictionary. In his book *Hinduism*,

published in 1877, he predicted the Hindu religion's demise and advocated for the Christian gospel to contest and check the spread of Islam. Monier-Williams's noted translations include Kalidas's *Vikramorvasi* (1849) and *Sakuntala* (1853).

(iii) Max Muller (1823-1900)

Max Muller, besides all the 19th century European Indologists, must also be attributed with translating and revealing the sacred literature of the Hindus to the West. He distinctly mentioned his intentions thus- "India has been conquered once, but India must be conquered again, and that second conquest should be a conquest by education." The letter written by Muller to his wife mentioned that he was explicitly employed to translate the Vedas in a manner that Hindus lose faith in them. Max Müller promoted the controversial Aryan invasion theory and formulated his dates of Vedic origin accordingly. He was penurious before he was recruited by the British. He firmly believed in the need for Hindu reforms to overlay Christian views on Hinduism.

Here is the excerpt of the letter written by Max Müller to his wife-

...I feel convinced, though I shall not live to see it, that this edition of mine and the translation of the Veda will hereafter tell to a great extent on the fate of India and on the growth of millions of souls in that country. It is the root of their religion, and to show them what that root is, I feel sure, the only way of uprooting all that has sprung from it during the last 3,000 years. (Muller)

Conclusion

The Colonists punctured our credence and the existing arrangement, our pride, self-assurance, and autonomy. The indigenous industries were destroyed economically. Instead, India developed into a hub for raw material exports and finished goods imports. It provided raw materials to British industries at a low cost and a market for their finished products. However, false propaganda by the colonizers was responsible for the actual cultural swing. They began to distort and rewrite history to foster their own benefits. For example, James Mill wrote *History of British India (1917)* without ever visiting India or learning any Indian languages. James, in his book, bashes India's history, character, religion, literature, arts, and laws. The British attempted to cast doubt on Indians' abilities in any field. They always projected Britain and, at times, Europe as being superior to India in all matters.

Conversely, India has taken giant strides in terms of socio-economic progress now. Present-day India has undergone a great transformation which is sufficient to infuse a sense of pride amongst all Indians. The National Education Policy 2020 makes provisions for scholarships for people of all ages to study Indian Languages, Arts, and Culture. The vision of the policy includes:

To instil a deep-rooted pride in being Indian, not only in thought, but also in spirit, intellect, and deeds, as well as to develop knowledge, skills, values, and dispositions that support responsible commitment to human rights, sustainable development and living, and global wellbeing, thereby reflecting a truly global citizen. (National Education Policy 2020)

A time for brushing aside the cruelties of the past has arrived. An exceptional balance and a harmonious amalgamation of traditional and contemporary influences must be achieved. Historically, urbanization and industrialization resulted in the loss of our traditional values. Our idea of success nowadays has become purely economic. We do not value spiritual attainments, aesthetics, and wisdom. Power and wealth have become the premier goals for individuals and nations alike. In pursuit of wealth and material wellbeing, we moved away from our roots and lost many cultural values. Children are questioning the purpose of following various customs and traditions, which, according to them, are outdated. The new generations have started questioning our culture and traditions and branded us as superstitious if not given proper reasoning. Indian herbs like Turmeric and Tulsi with medicinal values have always been a part of our daily life. Similarly, various Indian traditional practices were present in lifestyle because they have had significance for human wellbeing.

India is a diverse country with a diverse population. What is it that binds this diverse group of people together? This country's cultural framework holds it together as a whole. The cultural threads bind Indians together as a people. What steps should be taken to revitalize this culture? Culture is a naturally ensuing entity. Today's societal trends lead us to emulate Western culture, regarded as superior. But we must appreciate the importance of our culture. The world has a wide range of cultures. Since ancient times, Indian culture has been designed to lead people to the spiritual process. Every activity was designed to help people grow spiritually. However, few essential practices, such as Yoga, have been ingrained in people's daily lives. It is critical to be educated about the significance of these practices that we have been practicing for thousands of years, such as touching the feet of our elders. It is time to reintroduce our traditions and values into our daily lives. It is time to surf our roots and pass this knowledge on to future generations through education. We need to persuade people to abandon the erroneous belief that Indians are inferior, uneducated people who must imitate the West. We must combine the best aspects of both cultures. Both lifestyles have advantages and disadvantages, and we must find a way to bridge the gap. This is to optimize our lives and be better human beings by reviving our customs with proper reasoning.

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