

35

Colonialism in India

35.1 INTRODUCTION

Development of our Constitutional framework is to a great extent based on the legacies of the British Colonial rule and the Indian National Movement. Many of our economic, social and political problems that we seek to solve today, were the creation of the colonial rule of the British. The realisation of the true nature of the British colonialism by the Indian people provided the basic ground for the National Movement and it was the strategies, aims and objectives of the National Movement that shaped our social, political and economic policies and activities after independence. It also inspired millions of Asians, Africans and Latin Americans to vigorously fight against alien Colonial rulers in their own countries.

Hence a study of the impact of British colonial rule is necessary to gain knowledge about the nature of the national freedom struggle, the basis of our constitution and the nature of the present political system of India.

35.2 OBJECTIVES

After reading this lesson, you will be able to :

- recall the meaning of colonialism;
- analyse the nature of British colonialism in India;
- identify the impact of colonialism on Indian economy;
- recognise the impact of colonialism on Indian social system;
- analyse the impact of British rule on Indian political system.

35.3 MEANING OF COLONIALISM

Colonialism is another form of capitalism that developed mainly as consequence of industrial revolution in the western world.

Simultaneous with the Industrial Revolution, some of the manufacturers and traders started using better technology and sought cheap raw material and an open market to sell their product. To avoid market competition and to enhance their margin of profit, they tried to establish their monopoly over trade. For this purpose, they made efforts to acquire territories, ultimately leading to acquisition of political power. It further led to subjugation and

exploitation of the weaker and backward people at the hands of some stronger and advanced nations of the world. It is this way that the modern colonialism came into being. Colonialism aims at creating, organising and maintaining dominance of advanced countries over people of other backward countries. Such dominance is mainly for economic gain through exploitation.

There are many other factors which are responsible for establishment of colonial rule and its expansion. Pride for one's own nation or patriotism is one of them. Similarly, propagation of one's own religion, language and culture promotes people to subjugate others. Spirit of adventure and military enterprise, at times, play a significant role in establishing colonial rule.

The terms 'Colonialism' and 'Imperialism' are used interchangeably. Many people believe, that, colonialism ultimately leads to imperialism. But in fact, there is no difference between the two, in so far as their causes and consequences are concerned. Some one has rightly pointed out that, imperialism is the state power beyond its borders or it is an extra-territorial possession. In short, colonialism or imperialism is a projection of political, economic and cultural power of one nation into the internal life of another people. Its interest doesn't lie in welfare of the dependent people but in its own economic gain. It matters little for the colonial rule, whether the dependent people are of the same race or not.

According to the Socialist view, colonialism or imperialism aims at dominance over monopoly and finance capital. It causes export of capital from the colony to the ruling nation. It divides the world into two, that of the propertyless and the idle rich, which ultimately results in war.

35.4 NATURE OF BRITISH COLONIALISM

The era of British Colonialism began in 1600 A.D., when British East India company was granted the Charter to trade with India and other countries of Asia and Africa. In the beginning, its aim was to supply the products of India and East Indies, especially spices, cotton and silk goods; which were having a ready market in Europe, yielding rich profit. But very soon, this aim was replaced by a policy of economic plunder and territorial expansion to gain monopoly over trade.

The nature of British Colonialism in India can be properly understood by dividing it into three phases. These are :

- 1) Mercantile Capitalism (Since inception to 1813 A.D.);
- 2) Free Trade Capitalism (From 1813 A.D. to 1858 A.D.); and
- 3) Financial Capitalism (From 1858 to 1947)

Let us analyse each one of these phases of British Colonialism in India.

1. Mercantile Capitalism (From the last days of Mughals to 1813 A.D.)

This phase of merchant capitalism was marked by the presence of British merchants in India as a part of the East India Company. To increase their margin of profit in sale and purchase of commodities, they established monopoly of trade through territorial annexation. In the process, they accumulated huge capital, which only helped large scale production of industrial goods in England. The East India Company, during this period, engaged itself in buying cheap raw materials from the Indian market in order to sell the same as finished goods to the Indian peoples at a very high price. But a need was felt by the British to control Indian territory for the sake of security as well as monopolisation of trade. Neither

the Company nor the British Government were in a position to invest huge resources in waging wars for the conquest of Indian territory. Disintegration of Moghul Empire, however, provided a golden opportunity to fulfil their wishes. First, they secured the Diwani rights or the right of civil administration in Bengal, Bihar and Orissa in 1765. Besides getting a huge margin of profit from trade, they resorted to a limitless plunder in those areas.

The worst kind of exploitation of Indian people began, when the East India Company followed an evil design of depriving the artisans, handicrafts men and petty merchants of their manufacturing and trade. They were forced to accept very low wages and prices which were below the prevailing market rates.

Economic exploitation of India resulted in accumulation of wealth in the hands of the British, which in turn helped Industrial Revolution in England. During this period, India, an exporter of cotton to the industrially advanced countries, became the importer of manufactured cotton textiles. Such trading in both ways, yielded an enormous profit to the Company. On the other hand, a new bourgeois class, which came to power in England became envious of wealth and authority that the executives of the Company enjoyed. They made a hue and cry of Company's misrule in India and accordingly, got the resolutions passed by British Parliament against Company's administration.

As a result, certain reform measures were taken up through the Regulating Act of 1773, Pitt's India Act of 1784 and the Charter Acts of 1793 and 1813. These reforms in agriculture and industry provided for investment of capital in Indian economic enterprises, so that, economic development of India would also commence. Through a new policy, a new class of loyal supporters of the British rule was created. It was also decided to send English-educated Indian youth to England to train them in supervision of administrative work. Above all, this was needed for establishing a rapport with the new class of pro-British people in India.

During this phase of Merchant Capitalism, British officials remained busy in enhancement of their economic interests, for which they made some important changes in education, administration, judiciary, transport and communication besides the methods of agriculture and industrial production.

2. Free Trade-Capitalism (1813 A.D. to 1858 A.D.)

This phase of free trade capitalism was quite significant from the point of view of trade and commerce. Development of indigenous resources and establishment of an efficient system of administration for secure and stable trade was the hallmark of this period. During this period, a sound capital base was created in India to protect the economic interest of the British Colonial rule.

This phase of colonialism was also marked by many constitutional reforms to strike a workable balance between interests of the British imperialism and the demands of Indian nationalism. During this period, it was realised by the British that the establishment of a stable and efficient system of governance in India would further the interest of the Empire.

English rulers tried to establish peace and develop resources in India so as to fulfil the economic needs of their own country. They provided training to a section of people in order to enable them to help in running the administration. Instead of only exploiting Indian economy, they wanted to use India as the subordinate partner in their industrial and commercial ventures. All reform measures, which were taken during this phase of colonial rule, were meant to protect and promote their own interest. Free trade provided free entry to the British traders and capitalists into India. Agrarian reform introduced a new Zamindari

and Ryotwari system. Thus, came into existence a new intermediary class. This class helped British not only in collection of revenues but also in procurement of agricultural goods at an unbelievably low rate. This rich landlord class wielded tremendous amount of economic power and political patronage. Apparently, it provided much needed legitimacy to the colonial rule by painting a benevolent picture of it before Indian masses.

Zamindari System

Zamindars were an intermediary class of landlords between the government and the actual cultivators of land. Under Zamindari system, estates consisting of villages were assigned to the Zamindars for collection of land revenue. A fixed amount was annually paid to the Government in respect of each Zamindari. This system was introduced in 1793.

Ryotwari system

Ryots were small landowners who were cultivating their land with the help of landless labourers. Under this system, British Government collected land revenue directly from the landowners with an option to increase the amount of revenue from time to time. Though, apparently, it was meant to stop exploitation of landowning cultivators by Zamindars, it was really designed to augment Government revenue.

Export of raw materials from India and import of manufactured goods into India needed an efficient system of transport and communication. So, there started development of roads, construction of railway - lines, building of steamshipping and installation of posts and telegraphs. English language was introduced to educate Indians to be employed in administration.

This phase of colonial rule was terminated in 1858 just after the ruthless suppression of the First War of Indian Independence of 1857.

INTEXT QUESTIONS 35.1

Fill in the gap with correct word/figure given below.

- i) Colonialism developed mainly as a consequence of _____ revolution in the Western World.
(a) agricultural (b) industrial (c) Capitalist
- ii) The terms Colonialism and _____ are used interchangeably.
(a) Imperialism (b) Socialism (c) Nationalism
- iii) The East India Company secured the Diwani or rights of civil administration of Bengal, Bihar and Orissa in _____.
(a) 1755 (b) 1765 (c) 1768
- iv) Certain reform measures were taken up through the Regulating Act of _____.
(a) 1763 (b) 1766 (c) 1773
- v) Free trade provided free entry to the _____ traders and capitalists into India

(a) British (b) French (c) Dutch

vi) _____ reform introduced a new Zamindari and Ryotwari System in India.

(a) Capitalist (b) Agrarian (c) Industrial

3. Financial Capitalism (1858 A.D. – 1947 A.D.)

The last phase of colonialism in India was characterised by huge investment of capital by the British industrialists. This phase of colonialism began with the replacement of the Company-rule by direct imperial rule of the British Government. Due to this, the newly-emerged capitalist class of Britain felt it quite safe to make huge financial investment in industrial ventures in India. During this period, Indian economy came under complete dominance of the British financial capitalism.

As mentioned earlier, this final phase of the colonial or imperial rule started with British Government taking over administration of India from the East India Company and after a prolonged freedom struggle spreading over more than half a century, it ended with India attaining independence in 1947. In 1857, the great uprising of the Indian people against the Company's misrule was ruthlessly suppressed by the British with army and weaponry. Its immediate consequence was a strong resentment among British politicians. This resulted in India becoming a part of the British Empire. Instead of only the East India Company enjoying the benefits, now, the new class of British industrialists started getting huge profits and rich dividends through massive investment in industrial enterprises in India. Thus, enormous amount of wealth of India in terms of finance capital was exported to Britain.

All kinds of reforms in the field of agriculture, industry, transport, communication, irrigation and education were made to hoodwink innocent Indian people, with the sole aim to safeguard and expand their own economic interests. The reforms of 1892 and 1909 were not really made to fulfil the demands of Indian nationalists but to adjust British administration to the changed circumstances in India. That is why, even Montague Declaration of 1917, pledged progressive realisation of self-governing institutions in India. You will learn more about it in lesson No. 37. Although the reforms and Government Acts granted Indians increasing participation in administration, the situation did not change. It was due to enormous powers conferred on Governors and the Governor General as 'special responsibilities', that the British Government could protect its own economic interest adequately. This final phase of British colonialism ended in 1947 with the passage of the Act of Indian Independence by the British Parliament.

British colonial rule continued for over two centuries in India. Indian people for the first time, were exposed to an alien rule, which, not only affected Indian economy, its social and political system, but also, its life style and its expression. This overall impact has three major aspects viz. economic, social and political.

INTEXT QUESTIONS 38.2

Tick the right answer.

- | | |
|--|--------|
| i) The last phase of colonialism in India was characterised by peaceful development. | Yes/No |
| ii) Enormous amount of wealth of India in terms of finance-capital was exported to Britain. | Yes/No |
| iii) Montague Declaration of 1917 pledged progressive realisation of self governing institutions in India. | Yes/No |

- iv) Due to enormous powers conferred on Governors and the Governor General, the British Government could not protect its economic interest adequately Yes/No

35.5 IMPACT OF COLONIAL RULE ON INDIAN ECONOMY

In economic sphere, millions of rural artisans, weavers, craftsmen and agricultural workers were ruined due to loss of work. Many prosperous traders and merchants were reduced to the level of poverty. Agriculture and manufacturing of agricultural goods, which were closely integrated, were made to fall apart. It was the British intruder, who broke up the Indian handloom and destroyed the spinning wheel. Infact, British rule destroyed India's fine art and industries and thereby the structure of old Indian society. Lack of investment and scarcity of funds forced the indigenous industries to close down.

This, in its turn, ruined the Indian trading community. Even British industrialists were alarmed at the growth of Indian industry and prompted British Government to change fiscal policies to safeguard their interest in India.

British Government adopted the policy of free trade with open competition, which obstructed the growth of indigenous industries. The British policies and actions mentioned above, systematically destroyed Indian economy and caused the drain of India's huge resources and wealth to England.

Impact of British rule on Indian economy had some silver lining which cannot be overlooked altogether. During this period, India was introduced to the machine age in industrial sphere, which improved the method of work and technology. Colonial rule instilled a sense of patriotism among Indian entrepreneurs, who being unable to compete with British monopolists, felt that their interest could be protected only when laws would be made to serve the national interest of India, and not that of England. Overall industrial development was expedited through investment of huge imported capital. Improvement of the system of transport, communication, development of roads, railways, sea ports and urban marketing centres, rapidly increased the volume of domestic trade and commerce in India.

35.6 IMPACT OF COLONIALISM ON INDIAN SOCIAL SYSTEM

Impact of British rule on Indian society is unparalleled. During this period, a wave of westernisation overwhelmed the Indian Society.

British rulers propagated racial superiority of the white people over the Indians. They believed that their supposed superiority justified their dominance. They considered it their responsibility to civilize the black people. Even Hindu culture and character were denounced and ridiculed.

During British rule, Christian missionaries converted a large number of Hindus, mainly so-called lowcaste and tribal people to Christianity. Distinction of caste was highlighted to create disunity in the society. Social superstition and untouchability became objects of ridicule by the British who never thought of eradicating them. They instilled a sense of inferiority in the minds of Indian people through racial segregation. Indians were not allowed to travel, dine and use other public facilities with Europeans.

Some noted social reformers and nationalists like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Swamy Vivekanand, Swamy Dayanand, and M.G. Ranade, brought down various social distinctions, paving way for social unity. British adopted the policy of divide and rule, even in the context of Indian society. They highlighted differences based on religion and caste. Colonial

rulers created an intermediary class of Zamindars, which became the source of social oppression and exploitation in the rural areas. On the whole, during British Colonial rule, a systematic effort was made to degrade and divide the Indian society.

However, British colonialism also indirectly benefitted Indian Society in certain spheres. Introduction of English language, which was infact intended to create a class of people appreciative of the English culture and life style, indirectly helped Indians to acquire a link language. Although introduction of English helped in developing an efficient bureaucracy for the British Government, it gave Indians an opportunity to know western concept of rights and freedom and the extent of discrimination practised against them by the British. With English language, a national press could become a reality. Exchange of ideas among Indians speaking variety of languages became possible. Indian classics and scriptures were translated from Sanskrit to English language. Indians could read the works of western philosophers like Locke, Rousseau, Mill, Burk and Voltaire and became familiar with the French Revolution and American War of Independence.

As has been already mentioned, British Colonial rule was not an unmixed evil. First of all, to avoid any kind of friction with Indians, British Government never tried to interfere with social norms. Encouraged by nationalists and social reformers, many English intellectuals and administrators helped to remove different types of social evils and superstitions from the Indian society. Efforts made by Brahma Samaj and Arya Samaj diminished idolatry. Laws were passed against the evil practices of *satee* and human sacrifice. Measures were taken to prohibit child marriage. Efforts at imparting education to women and encouraging widow remarriage were meant for emancipation of women. While on the one hand, the British Government was apparently trying to reduce social distinctions, on the other hand, it was further dividing the society by awarding titles of honour like Rai Saheb etc. to bring the supporters of British Rule to prominence. Special treatment was given to certain sections of the Indian society. Literature on Indian art, history, archaeology etc. was written by many British writers. Indians were made to look at their own society and culture through the eyes of the Westerners. Social division on occupational lines crumbled. A kind of scientific and modern attitude to life was inculcated among people. Social interaction and mobility increased considerably during this period.

35.7 IMPACT OF COLONIALISM ON INDIAN POLITICAL SYSTEM

Prior to the establishment of Colonial rule, the princely rulers in India were close to the people. In other words, the relationship between people and the kings was direct. But, British colonial rule created a cleavage by placing the administration at a distance from the people. Redressal of grievances of the people became difficult, complicated and the problem of communication through a foreign language made it still more difficult.

The nature and character of bureaucracy also contributed towards keeping the administration away from the people. Replacement of Company's rule by that of British Government in 1858, did not change the character of bureaucracy. Giving more and more administrative responsibilities to Indians by the British through various reform measures, were more apparent than real. These were not meant to train Indians for self-government and Parliamentary democracy, but to strike a deal between interest of the British and demands of the Indian nationalist leaders.

British Government's efforts to create various divisions among Indians caused delay in India's independence for many years. Englishmen infact, were against the introduction of Parliamentary democracy in India. They considered Indians unfit for such type of democratic governance. Lord Morley, the architect of Morley Minto Reforms, said in the House of

Lords: "..... a parliamentary system in India is not the goal to which I, for one moment, would aspire."

Therefore, the reforms of 1909, 1919 or Government of India Act of 1935 were a systematic effort of the British Government, based on a shrewd policy of defusing the situation through lapse of time to curb the growth of Indian nationalism.

However, there is a positive aspect of the impact of British rule on India's political system. Under the colonial rule, India achieved political unity and administrative unification to an extent, which could not be secured under Mughals. For their administrative convenience and control, the British Government established a well ordered society and a centralised state that helped in the growth of nationalism in India. For the first time people of this vast sub-continent were governed by a common rule of law, under a single political authority which established unity amidst diversities.

One of the most important contribution of the British rule is the introduction of Parliamentary democracy in India. It made free expression of political will of all citizens possible. Infact, political training of Indians in self government was initiated by the British. Through the Government of India Act of 1935, federalism was adopted in order to maintain regional linguistic and cultural identity of various sections of the people. To prevent separatism and other trends towards disintegration, certain dominant unitary features were incorporated. Prominent among them was a strong All-India bureacracy. While it was acting as a strong pillar of the British Raj before Independence, it is still continuing as the most important institution of our democratic setup after Independence. Similarly, a single integrated judicial system with the Supreme Court at the apex was evolved during the British rule with countrywide jurisdiction. As has already been mentioned, introduction of English language during British rule, not only gave India a strong national press, an enlightened national outlook but an exposure to the outside world and a universal means of communication.

However, under conditions of suppression and exploitation, an unprecedented national awakening took place, giving rise to a stiff resistance to the alien rule. Gainful economic activity of the British came to an end under such national resistance from Indians. Ultimately growing demands of Indian nationalism, made the British to convert their divide and rule policy into divide and quit. Thus a long chapter of colonial domination ended on 15th August 1947.

INTEXT QUESTIONS 35.3

Fill in the blanks with appropriate words :

- i) Under Colonial rule, millions of rural artisans, weavers and agricultural workers were ruined due to _____.
(a) Low investment (b) Loss of work (c) Scarcity of capital
- ii) It was the British intruder who broke up the Indian handloom and destroyed the _____.
(a) Social structure (b) political freedom (c) spinning wheel
- iii) During British rule, overall industrial development was expedited through investment of huge imported _____.
(a) Machinery (b) Capital (c) Manpower
- iv) British rulers propogated racial superiority of white people over the _____.
(a) Hindus (b) Muslims (c) Indians
- v) With English language, a national press could become a _____.

- (a) reality (b) burden (c) bottleneck.
- vi) Social interaction and _____ increased considerably during the period.
(a) transport (b) self respect (c) mobility
- vii) The nature and character of bureaucracy also contributed towards keeping the administration away from the _____.
(a) people (b) state (c) nationalists.
- viii) Englishmen considered Indians unfit for democratic _____.
(a) Institutions (b) governance (c) experiment
- ix) Reforms of 1909, 1919 and Government of India Act of 1935 were a systematic effort of the British to curb the growth of Indian _____.
(a) patriotism (b) challenge (c) nationalism
- x) For the first time, people of this vast sub continent were governed by a common rule of law, under a single political authority which established unity amidst _____.
(a) disturbances (b) diversities (c) movements

WHAT YOU HAVE LEARNT

In this lesson, you have read about the nature of British Colonialism and its impact on India's economic, social and political life. You have seen that Colonialism is a form of capitalism which developed mainly as a result of industrial revolution in the western world. Its establishment leads to the imposition of religion, language and culture of the ruling nation over its people.

The nature of British Colonialism in India has been divided into three phases.

- a) Mercantile Capitalism is marked by entry and expansion of British East India Company and establishment of its monopoly through territorial annexation.
- b) Free Trade Capitalism created a sound base for British economic interest and established a stable and efficient system of governance. Free trade provided free entry to British traders and capitalists into India.
- c) Financial Capitalism began with the replacement of the company rule by direct imperial rule of the British Government. During this period, Indian economy came under complete dominance of the British financial capitalism. Besides huge investment of foreign capital and export of profits, this phase is marked by various reforms and Government Acts which aimed but failed in progressive realisation of self governing institutions in India.

Impact of British rule on Indian economy had its dark aspect as it destroyed Indian agriculture and industry and reduced rural artisans, craftsmen and agricultural workers to the level of poverty. However, the method of work and technology in industries gradually improved. Improved modes of transport, communication which helped in the progress of internal trade and commerce.

The impact of imperialist rule on the Indian social system was also unparalleled. A wave of westernization overwhelmed the Indian society. Propagation of English language and large scale conversion to christianity commenced during British rule. An intermediary class of Zamindars was created, which caused social oppression and exploitation in rural areas.

You have also seen that the British rulers infact did not train Indians for self government and parliamentary democracy. All reform measures were actually meant to delay India's independence. However, during the colonial rule, India achieved political unity and uniformity in administration. Other significant features of this rule included an All-India bureaucracy and single integrated judicial system.

Hence, it may be summarised up that the British imperialism and colonial rule had its negative and positive aspects.

TERMINAL EXERCISE

1. What do you mean by Colonialism?
 2. What was the nature of British Colonial rule during the phase of Mercantile Capitalism?
 3. What is Zamindari system?
 4. What were the positive aspects of British rule affecting Indian economy?
 5. Briefly state the social reforms that were initiated during the British rule in India?
 6. Which British political and administrative institutions are still functioning in independent India?
-

KEY TO INTEXT QUESTION

- 1.1** i) Industrial ii) imperialism iii) 1765
 iv) 1773 v) British vi) agrarian
- 1.2** i) No ii) Yes iii) Yes iv) No.
- 1.3** i) Loss of work ii) spinning wheel iii) capital
 iv) indians v) reality vi) mobility
 vii) people viii) governance ii) Nationalism
 x) diversities.

HINTS FOR TERMINAL QUESTIONS

- Q. No. 1 page 3 & 4 (1.3)
- Q. No. 2 page 6 para 2 (1.4.1)
 page 7 para 1 & 2 (1.4.2)
- Q. No. 3 page 10 para 2
- Q. No. 4 page 17 para 1 (1.5)
- Q. No. 5 page 19 para 2 (1.6)
- Q. No. 6 page 23 (1.7)