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Survey of British Policies in India

Administrative Policies

Contrary to their pre-1857 intentions of trying to modernise India on progressive lines, now the administration adopted blatantly reactionary policies on the pretext that Indians were not fit for self-governance and needed British presence in their lives.

■ Divide and Rule

Determined to avoid a united mass action challenging their authority, the British rulers in India decided to practice a naked policy of divide and rule, by putting princes against states' people, region against region, province against province, caste against caste and Hindus against Muslims.

After an immediate spell of repression against Muslims, following the 1857 revolt, the authorities decided, after 1870, to use the middle and upper educated classes among Muslims against the rising tide of nationalism, using conflicts over scarce resources in education, administrative jobs and later political spoils (which were inherent in the very logic of colonial underdevelopment) as a tool to create a split along religious lines among educated Indians.

■ Hostility Towards Educated Indians

The emerging middle class nationalist leadership was analysing the exploitative, colonial character of British rule and

Views

All experience teaches us that where a dominant race rules another, the mildest form of government is despotism.
Charles Wood (the Secretary of State for India)

Systems of nomination, representation and election were all means of enlisting Indians to work for imperial ends.
Anil Seal

demanding Indian participation in administration. At a time when the nationalist movement was born (Indian National Congress was founded in 1885), the British interpreted the moves as a challenge to their authority and adopted a hostile attitude to such leadership. In fact, from then onwards, they opposed all those who stood for modern education.

Attitude Towards the Zamindars

In their pursuit of reactionary policies and hope to expand their social base, the British looked for alliances with the most reactionary of social groups—the princes, zamindars, etc. The British intended to use them as a counterweight against nationalist-minded intelligentsia. Now, the zamindars and landlords were hailed as the 'natural' and 'traditional' leaders of people. Lands of most of the Awadh taluqdars confiscated prior to 1857 were restored to them. The interests and privileges of zamindars and landlords were protected in opposition to those of the peasants; the former in turn saw the British as guarantors of their very existence and became their firm supporters.

Attitude Towards Social Reforms

Having decided to side with the reactionary elements of Indian society, the British withdrew support to social reforms, which they felt had aroused the wrath of orthodox sections against them. Also, by encouraging caste and communal consciousness, the British helped the reactionary forces.

Underdeveloped Social Services

A disproportionately large expenditure on army and civil administration and the cost of wars left little to be spent on

social services like education, health, sanitation, physical infrastructure, etc., a legacy which still haunts this country. And whatever facilities were established catered to the elite sections and urban areas.

■ Labour Legislations

As in the early stages of industrial revolution in Europe, the working conditions in factories and plantations in the nineteenth-century India were miserable. Working hours were long—for women and children as well as for men—and wages were low. In overcrowded, poorly ventilated and poorly lighted working places, the safety measures were practically non-existent.

Ironically, the first-ever demand for regulation of the condition of workers in factories in India came from the Lancashire textile capitalist lobby. Apprehending the emergence of a competitive rival in the Indian textile industry under conditions of cheap and unregulated labour, they demanded the appointment of a commission for investigation into factory conditions. The first commission was appointed in 1875 although the first Factory Act was not passed before 1881.

The **Indian Factory Act, 1881** dealt primarily with the problem of child labour (between 7 and 12 years of age). Its significant provisions were:

- employment of children under 7 years of age prohibited,
- working hours restricted to 9 hours per day for children,
- children to get four holidays in a month,
- hazardous machinery to be properly fenced off.

The **Indian Factory Act, 1891**

- increased the minimum age (from 7 to 9 years) and the maximum (from 12 to 14 years) for children,
- reduced maximum working hours for children to 7 hours a day,
- fixed maximum working hours for women at 11 hours per day with an one-and-a-half hour interval (working hours for men were left unregulated),
- provided weekly holiday for all.

Views

I am sorry to hear of the increasing friction between the Hindus and Mohammedans in the north-west and the Punjab. One hardly knows what to wish, for unity of ideas and action could be very dangerous politically; divergence of ideas and collision are administratively troublesome. Of the two, the latter is least risky, though it throws anxiety and responsibility upon those on the spot where the friction exists.

Hamilton (Secretary of State, 1897)

The English were an imperial race, we were told, with God-given right to govern us and keep us in subjection; if we protested, we were reminded of the tiger qualities of an imperial race.

Jawaharlal Nehru

But these laws did not apply to British-owned tea and coffee plantations where the labour was exploited ruthlessly and treated like slaves. The Government helped these planters by passing laws such as those which made it virtually impossible for a labourer to refuse to work once a contract was entered into. A breach of contract was a criminal offence, with a planter having the right to get the defaulting labourer arrested.

More labour laws were passed under nationalist pressures in the twentieth century but the overall working conditions remained deplorable as ever.

■ Restrictions on Freedom of the Press

The nationalists had been quick to use new advancements in press technology to educate public opinion and influence government policies through criticism and censure and later to arouse national consciousness.

In 1835, Metcalfe had lifted restrictions imposed on the Indian press. But Lytton, fearing an increased influence of the nationalist press on public opinion, imposed restrictions on Indian language press through the infamous Vernacular Press Act, 1878. This Act had to be repealed under public protest in 1882. After that, the press enjoyed relative freedom for about two decades, but was under repression

again in the wake of swadeshi and anti-partition movement as restrictions were imposed in 1908 and 1910. (Also refer to chapter on "Development of Press in India".)

■ White Racism

The notion of white superiority was maintained very carefully by the colonial rulers by systematically excluding the Indians from higher grades of services—both civil and military—from railway compartments, parks, hotels, clubs, etc., and by public display of racial arrogance through beatings, blows and even murders (reported as accidents). As Elgin once wrote, "We could only govern by maintaining the fact that we were the dominant race—though Indians in services should be encouraged, there is a point at which we must reserve the control to ourselves, if we are to remain at all."

British Social and Cultural Policy in India

Till 1813, the British followed a policy of non-interference in the social, religious and cultural life of the country. After 1813, measures were taken to transform Indian society and its cultural environs because of the emergence of new interests and ideas in Britain of the nineteenth century in the wake of significant changes in Europe during the 18th and the 19th centuries. Some of these changes were—

(i) **Industrial Revolution** which began in the 18th century and resulted in the growth of industrial capitalism. The rising industrial interests wanted to make India a big market for their goods and therefore required partial modernisation and transformation of Indian society.

(ii) **Intellectual Revolution** which gave rise to new attitudes of mind, manners, and morals.

(iii) **French Revolution** which with its message of liberty, equality and fraternity, unleashed the forces of democracy and nationalism.

The new trend was represented by Bacon, Locke, Voltaire, Rousseau, Kant, Adam Smith and Bentham in thought and by Wordsworth, Byron, Shelley and Charles Dickens in literature.

■ Characteristics of New Thought

Some of the characteristics of the new wave of thought were—

(i) **Rationalism** which advocated faith in reason and a scientific attitude.

(ii) **Humanism** which advocated the love of man—the belief that every man is an end in himself and should be respected and prized as such. No man has a right to look upon another man as a mere agent of his happiness. These ideals gave rise to liberalism, socialism and individualism.

(iii) **Doctrine of Progress** according to which nothing is static and all societies must change with time. Man has the capacity to remodel nature and society on just and rational lines.

■ Schools of Thought

These new currents of thought caused conflicts among administrators and produced different schools of thought:

The **Conservatives** advocated introduction of as few changes as possible. Indian civilisation, they felt, was different from the European one but not necessarily inferior to it. Many of these thinkers respected Indian philosophy and culture. If at all, Western ideas and practices were to be introduced gradually and cautiously. Social stability was a must, they felt. Early representatives of this school of thought were Warren Hastings and Edmund Burke and later ones included Munro, Metcalfe, and Elphinstone. The Conservatives remained influential throughout and most of the British officials in India were generally of a conservative persuasion.

The **Paternalistic Imperialists** became influential especially after 1800. They were sharply critical of Indian

society and culture and used to justify economic and political enslavement of India.

The **Radicals** went beyond the narrow criticism and imperialistic outlook of the Conservatives and the Imperialists and applied advanced humanistic and rational thought to the Indian situation. They thought that India had the capacity to improve and that they must help the country do that. They wanted to make India a part of the modern progressive world of science and humanism and therefore advocated the introduction of modern western science, philosophy and literature. Some of the British officials who came to India after 1820 were Radicals. They were strongly supported by Raja Rammohan Roy and other like-minded reformers.

But predominantly, the ruling elements in the British Indian administration continued to be imperialistic and exploitative. They thought that the modernisation of India had to occur within broad limits imposed by the needs of an easier and more thorough exploitation of its resources. In this respect, often the Radicals also towed a conservative line. They desired most of all the safety and perpetuation of the British rule in India; every other consideration was secondary.

■ Indian Renaissance

There were many Indians who instigated social reform and caused legislations to be brought about so as to control and eradicate social evils imbedded in so-called tradition. Rammohan Roy, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, B.M. Malabari, to name a few social reformers, worked hard to get legislation passed by the government to remove social evils. [These aspects have been discussed in detail in the chapter on Religious and Social Reform.]

■ Dilemma Before the Government

The government feared that too much modernisation might generate forces hostile to their interests; thus it was thought to be appropriate to opt for partial modernisation—introducing it in some respects and blocking it in others, in other words, a 'colonial modernisation'.

■ Role of Christian Missionaries

The missionaries regarded Christianity to be a superior religion and wanted to spread it in India through westernisation which, they believed, would destroy the faith of the natives in their own religion and culture. Towards this end, the Christian missionaries

— supported the Radicals whose scientific approach, they believed, would undermine the native culture and beliefs;

— supported the Imperialists since law and order and the British supremacy were essential for their propaganda; and

— sought business and the capitalist support holding out the hope to them that the Christian converts would be better customers of their goods.

■ British Retreat

After 1858, however, the policy of hesitant modernisation was gradually abandoned. However, the Indians proved to be apt pupils and shifted rapidly towards modernisation of their society and assertion of their culture and demanded a rule in accordance with the modern principles of liberty, equality and justice. Now, the British came to side with the socially orthodox and conservative elements of society. They also encouraged casteism and communalism.

British Policy Towards Princely States

Relations with princely states were to be guided by a two-point policy—using and perpetuating them as bulwark of the empire and subordinating them completely to British authority (the policy of subordinate union).

To cultivate these states as a buffer against future political unrest and to reward them for their loyalty during the revolt of 1857, the policy of annexation was abandoned. The new policy was to depose or punish but not annex. Also, territorial integrity of states was guaranteed and it was

View

The British and the princes needed one another; India's need for either was highly doubtful.

F.G. Hutchins

announced that their right to adopt an heir would be respected.

The subordination of princely states to British authority was completed when the fiction of Indian states standing in a status of equality with the Crown as independent, sovereign states ended with the Queen adopting the title of *Kaiser-i-Hind* (Queen Empress of India) in 1876, to emphasise British sovereignty over entire India. It was later made clear by Lord Curzon that the princes ruled their states merely as agents of the British Crown. With paramountcy, the British Government exercised the right to interfere in the internal affairs of states through their residents or by appointing and dismissing ministers and officials.

The British were helped further in their encroachment by modern developments in communication—railways, roads, telegraph, canals, post offices, etc. The motive for interference was also provided by the rise of nationalist, democratic sentiments in these states, the suppression of which, the British realised, was essential for their survival. As a positive side to these modern political movements, the British helped these states adopt modern administrative institutions. (Also refer to chapter on "Indian States under British Rule".)

British Foreign Policy in India

The pursuance of a foreign policy, guided by interest of British imperialism, often led to India's conflicts with neighbouring countries. These conflicts arose due to various reasons. Firstly, political and administrative consolidation of the country coupled with the introduction of modern means of communication impelled the Government of India to reach out for natural, geographical frontiers for internal cohesion

and defence which sometimes resulted in border clashes. Secondly, the British Government had as its major aims in Asia and Africa—

  (i) protection of the invaluable Indian empire;

 (ii) expansion of British commercial and economic interests;

(iii) keeping other European imperialist powers, whose colonial interests came in conflict with those of the British, at an arm's length in Asia and Africa.

These aims led to British expansion and territorial conquests outside India's natural frontiers, and to conflicts with other imperialist European powers such as Russia and France.

While the interests served were British, the money spent and the blood shed was Indian.

(A survey of British relations with various neighbours of India has been made in the chapter on 'British Expansion and Consolidation in India').

Summary

- **Administrative Policies**

  Divide and Rule.

  Hostility to educated Indians.

  Zamindars and landlords propped as counterweights to the nationalists.

  Reversal of policy of support to social reforms.

  Social services ignored.

  Half-hearted and inadequate labour legislations introduced.

  Stifling of press wherever seen to be helping the nationalist upsurge.

  Racial arrogance.

- **British Social and Cultural Policies**

- **Foreign Policy**

  Reach out to natural geographical frontiers for internal cohesion and defence.

  Keep other European powers at an arm's length.

  Promote British economic and commercial interests.