
UNIT 5 IMPERIAL IDEOLOGIES AND PSYCHE: ORIENTALISTS CONSTRUCTION OF INDIA AND THE UTILITARIANS

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5.0 OBJECTIVES

In this Unit you will get to know about:

- the ways in which the British perception of India was being shaped,
- how the British perception about India changed over the years, and
- some reasons as to why the British perception about India changed over the years.
- How the British Ideas and Ideologies contributed to the consolidation and expansion of the British rule in India

5.1 INTRODUCTION

The mid-18th century saw the transformation of the English East India Company from a trading enterprise to a political power. The English East India Company had remained a commercial body for one and a half centuries. Why did it acquire its political ambitions at this time? The expansion of European production and trade and the emergence of aggressive nation states in Europe lay behind the expansion of the European companies in India from the 1730s. In India, the decline of Mughal authority obviously provided a great opportunity for expansion of influence. The company's need for more revenue from taxation inclined it towards establishing an empire. The company needed money to maintain its trade and pay its troops and so acquisition of territory seemed the best method of meeting this requirement. The failure of indigenous rulers was primarily due to their inability to make naval interventions and inefficiency and efficacy of their armies against the better-equipped professional armies of the British. The existing rivalries among the indigenous rulers and the volatile political situation provided a favourable ground for political intervention and expansion of the British rule. It took a prolonged struggle for territorial expansion and political consolidation of the British. British fought a number of wars to subdue the local rulers. Internal weaknesses of the Indian states decided the final outcome of this struggle for power. However, it is not our aim to give a detailed chronicle, step by step of the piecemeal conquest of India by the British. Instead of a political narration, our focus in this unit would be on emerging imperial ideologies and traditions that helped in shaping the attempt to consolidate and systematize British rule in India. This was much before when a large colonial bureaucracy occupied itself, especially from the 1860s, with classifying people and their attributes, with censuses, surveys, and ethnographies, with recording transactions, marking space, establishing routines, and standardizing practices.

5.2 THE EARLY IMAGES

The very early images of India in the British mind were in terms of their own Western experience and their travels in the great voyages of discovery. The early travellers to India, Edward Terry and John Ovington described, the Mughal rule in 1689 'yet another example of Muslim despotism' The early British, who had read about the Ottoman and Persian empires in the great traveller Bernier's writings seem to have felt that a closer study of the Mughals would tell them very little that they did not know. It was believed by people like Sir William Temple in the classical age, that Lycurgus and Pythagoras had been taught by the Indians. However, the general impression was that in 17th century India tradition of learning no longer remained. Terry argued that the Brahmins who

were the ancient repositories of learning had degenerated.

Other signs of this degeneration were detected by the British in their contact with the communities of the West coast of India. It was argued that they were 'industrious, submissive, frugal and cowardly people' who had rigid habits of mind. The caste system was frequently cited as an example of their rigid mind. By and large these images were to persist. However, with the establishment of more permanent stations, the British had to contend with further Indian realities.

5.3 WARREN HASTINGS AND THE BRITISH IMAGE OF INDIA

The prevalent impression that the Indians had degenerated tended to be reinforced by British experience in 18th century India. At the same time the early administrators were keenly aware of India's past glory. To administer this country properly a thorough knowledge of India and its past was needed.

Warren-Hastings took this mission rather seriously. To fulfill this mission he was aware that he required a band of dedicated administrators, who would rise above the opportunistic fortune hunters who came from Britain to India. For this purpose, he made strenuous efforts to work towards institutions of learning which would first acquire the knowledge of the golden past of India and then, perhaps, convey it to those who could be involved in the project of administering India. This vision, which has sometimes been called the Orientalist vision, was not confined to Warren Hastings alone.

4.3.1 William Jones

William Jones, an English Jurist, was to commit himself to rediscovering India precisely for this reason. Identifying with the Whig tradition of British politics, Jones set himself the task of making India more intelligible to the British. Jones on coming to India realized that to understand India, individual initiative would not be enough. He gradually came around to the view that it would have to be an organized effort to combine scientific study with the labour and knowledge of a group of dedicated individuals. It was thus that the famous Asiatic Society was formed. The Society was to cover the task of unearthing knowledge about Asia both within and outside Asia.

It is here that Jones' efforts and Warren Hastings' vision were to coincide. The Society received full blessings of the Governor-General and an era of studying India from within close quarters of its social, religious, linguistic and political aspects began. This in itself was a departure from the early travellers who would normally record impressions and go away.

The Asiatic Society contributed in a major way by translating from Persian and Sanskrit works of Grammar, Puranas and the writings of Kalidasa.

Secondly, the Members of the Asiatic Society researched and published a large number of articles on Indian society and religion. As a result, Jones' contribution through the society was to 'infectiously spread the romantic fascination of India and her culture throughout Europe.'

5.3.2 Hastings in Practice

Hastings on the other hand had more practical reasons for promoting the Asiatic Society. By this time he had decided that the 'dual Government' established by Clive should go and the East India Company should take up the responsibility of Bengal. But he was not in favour of introducing English laws and English ways in India. His main idea was to rule the 'conquered in their own way'. He felt that the rapid growth of the British rule had excited various prejudices. These, he felt, needed to be stilled. Secondly, he wanted to reconcile British rule with the Indian institutions. This inevitably meant more intensive investigation into the 'manners and customs' of the country and an in depth analysis of the literature and laws of the Indians. It is for this purpose that Halhed, one of Hastings' lieutenants, drew up a list of religious and customary laws called the 'Gentoo Laws' which would help in understanding the process of furthering 'the conciliation of natives or ensure stability to the acquisitions'. This, Halhed maintained, would help further in enhancing the prospects of commerce and territorial establishment.

5.4 INSTITUTIONALIZATION

The early quests of rediscovering the rich Indian past then were slowly being subsumed to the practical needs of the British rule. To enable the practical task of training and the orienting future administrators to the goals of this task, in the tradition of Warren Hastings, Wellesley established the Fort William College at Calcutta in 1800.

The Fort William College basically impressed upon its students to study the Indian language so that the future administrator could take on the task of familiarising themselves with the 'vernacular' of the people and with India's past in a more concrete fashion. For example, studying Persian served very practical ends. Most of the Indian states used Persian as the language for maintaining official record and running the day to day business. Thus the vision of learning about India's past glory and the practical needs of the British administration were neatly dovetailed.

One should be careful in not reducing the steps taken to train the future administrators to the visions of the Indian past held by the administrators of the time. The Indian Residents, who were posted at the courts of various submissive Indian rulers, combined both the knowledge and usage of Persian with the cultural life styles of the court. To establish an identity with the Indian courtiers, the British Residents often donned the Indian dresses and maintained huge establishments like the court nobility. He would often adopt the manners and etiquettes of the court, while having a major say in the decisions of the ruler. The Indian rulers then maintained some kind of cultural independence in spite of being politically subservient to the British.

With the consolidation of the conquests and the need to create a more integrated administrative structure, the British had to step in to realms of Indian institutions like law and landed property. In the meanwhile, the industrial revolution in Britain had forced the need of market and raw materials outside Britain for the industrialist on the minds of the policy makers in Britain.

5.5 EVANGELICALISM AND OTHER NEW TRENDS

The new needs of the British necessarily meant that the idea of retaining Indian institutions and laws had to be reviewed. If new products were to enter the market there was a need to create a taste for them. This meant the infusion of a new way of life and culture, at least in the top crust of society.

In the early period of establishing institutions which discovered India's past, a neat compromise, of learning and the needs of the Company commerce and administration had been made. That is; 'learn about the Indian society but do not disturb it'. That this compromise was resented is shown in the struggle of the Sreerampore missionaries, who wanted to get on with the task of 'reforming' the current degeneration of the Indian society. While the Sreerampore missionaries were to do this task quietly, respecting the Indian traditions, the later missionaries like Charles Grant were to be openly hostile to 'Indian barbarism'. This hostility, a hall-mark of evangelicalism, was combined with the desire to 'civilize' India. Bringing a Christian zeal into his mission, Grant was to propagate the policy of assimilation of India into the great civilizing mission of Britain.

This attitude was to go hand in hand with the expression of British liberalism, as for example in Macaulay, the liberal British administrator's task was to 'civilize' rather than subdue. The merchant community supported this, firstly, because since they would benefit from the civilizing mission's laws to acquire property etc. in India, and then, under 'free trade' they could work out the problems of creating a market for British goods amongst the Indians. Charles Grant saw a

complementarity between the civilizing process and material prosperity. It was thus that another liberal C.E. Trevelyan, in 1838, was to outline his vision of India as 'the proudest monument of British benevolence'.

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) How did William Jones differ from the early travellers who wrote about India?

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- 2) Why did Warren Hastings want to study India's past?

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- 3) Did the Sreerampore Missionaries and Charles Grant agree with Warren Hastings way of dealing with India?

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5.5.1 The Battle for Improvement

The 'idea of improvement' was to take shape in the late 18th and early 19th centuries as a part of the vision of Britain as a promoter of prosperity and civilization. It was thus, that Cornwallis agreed to settle the revenue permanently on the landed class (Zamindars) in Bengal. Cornwallis's assumption was that since the main source of wealth was agriculture, the 'magic touch of property' will create capital and market in land. A more prosperous landed class with fixed obligation to the state and an English rule of law would create new men of enterprise in land who would also take trade forward. John Shore, who had seen the idea of Permanent Settlement grow and had more experience of the countryside, while agreeing with Cornwallis's vision of improvement, suggested that the improvement should be brought about by slow degrees by experimentally introducing innovations.

5.5.2 Preservation and Munro

Among the critics of Cornwallis were Munro in the South along with

his famous colleagues like Malcolm and Metcalfe. They found the Cornwallis System as **having** no regard for Indian history or experience. They opposed the very idea that a political society could be built on principles derived from an alien English tradition. It was for this reason that they opposed Cornwallis's import of the English rule of law with its strict division of judiciary and executive powers of the government. To Munro, politics was both experimental and pragmatic. The brief period the British had spent in India, he thought, was too short for any permanent solutions. It was thus he argued for periodic revision of the rate of *ryotwari*. He, therefore, argued that the basis of India's stable heritage, the village communities should be conserved. And any law and order problem should be met with a system where the judiciary and executive were fused together. This he felt would enable the preservation of justice to the peasantry as well as the aims of the British rule. In line with this idea' of preserving the varying heritage of India, Munro and his colleagues opposed a centrally imposed rule in India and 'favoured diversity in the Indian government'.

The task 'of transforming the Indian mind was then to become more complex. The task of education in the process was mooted by the liberal Macaulay as a prime responsibility of the British in India. But in the context of both the resistance of Orientalists, and pragmatic Anglo-Indians like Munro wanted to preserve the Indian institutions and culture the role of a western or an Anglicist education became a subject of immense controversy in the middle of the 19th century.

5.6 THE UTILITARIANS

The Utilitarians were not to take the liberal detour to education for the task of 'civilizing' and 'improving' India. They went back to the basic question of reform of law and landed property to create conditions where the market could flourish. They believed, under the guidance of Jeremy Bentham, that, a scientific and logical approach to these two problems of law and landed property could create reforms which would satisfy the principle of 'the greatest good of the greatest number'.

5.6.1 The Question of Law

The utilitarian ideas were to have a fundamental influence in moulding the British attitudes towards India. The question of law as an instrument of change was mooted under Bentinck. It was possible, he believed, for judiciary or Law to be the instrument of changing Indian practices like Sati and female infanticide.

LETTER

222. Bentinck's reply to the petition on sati

14 July 1830

The governor-general has read with attention the petition which has been presented to him: and has some satisfaction in observing that the opinions of the pandits consulted by the petitioners confirm the sup- position that widows are not, by the religious writings of the Hindus, commanded to destroy themselves; but that, upon the death of their husbands the choice of a life of strict and severe morality is everywhere expressly offered: that in the books usually considered of the highest authority it is commanded above every other course; and is stated to be adapted to a better state of society; such as, by the Hindus, is believed to have subsisted in former times.

Thus, none of the Hindus are placed in the distressing situation of having to disobey either the ordinances of the government or those of their religion. By a virtuous life a Hindu widow not only complies at once with the laws of the government and with the purest precepts of her own religion, but affords an example to the existing generation of that good conduct which is supposed to have distinguished tl1c earlier and better times of the Hindu people.

The petitioners cannot require the assurance that the British government will continue to allow the most complete toleration in matters of religious belief; and that to the full extent _of what it is possible to reconcile with

reason and with natural justice they will be undisturbed in the observance of their established usages. But, some of these, which the governor-general is unwilling to recall into notice, his predecessor in council, for the security of human life, and the preservation of social order, have, at different times, found it necessary to prohibit. If there is anyone which the common voice of all mankind would except from indulgence it is surely that by which the hand of a son is made the instrument of a terrible death to the mother who has borne him, and from whose heart he has drawn the sustenance of his helpless infancy. The governor-general has given an attentive consideration to all that has been urged by the numerous and respectable body of petitioners: and has thought fit to make this further statement, in addition to what had been before expressed as the reasons, which, in his mind, have made it an urgent duty of the British government to prevent the usage in support of which the petition has been preferred: but if the petitioners, should still be of opinion that the late regulation is not in conformity with the enactments of the imperial parliament, they have an appeal to the king in council, which the governor-general shall be most happy to forward.

Bentinck on Sati

With the coming of James Mill to the East India Company's London office, a systematic utilitarian attempt was made to combat the Orientalist, Cornwallis and the Munro heritage. A total vision of political reform on the philosophical premises of utilitarianism was sought to be given a concrete shape. We see a series of laws and penal codes enacted under the Benthamite principle of a centrally logically and coherently evolved system which would go down to the grassroots. In the process it would give the direction to the Indian government to function 'with a united purpose.'

5.6.2 The Question of Land Revenue

Mill also supported a restructuring of the land revenue policy in a manner that would be consistent with utilitarian economics. While, on the one hand this meant a direct contact with the mass of cultivators as in Munro's *ryotwari* settlement, on the other hand this meant taxing the landlord along Ricardo's philosophy. This taxation would be in such a manner that the landlord would not enjoy undue benefit at the cost of manufacture and trade just by virtue of ownership of land. This meant that landholder would give to the state as tax on land revenue a certain proportion of the net produce (i.e. the gross produce minus cost of cultivation).

This doctrine of rent was sought to be put into practice by officers like Pringle in Bombay. Elaborate survey methods were used to calculate the 'net produce' from land. Then tax rates were assessed. However, in practice the revenue demand often went very high, sometimes as much as fifty to sixty percent of the produce. This led gradually to the abandonment of complex calculations based on the rent doctrine. From 1840s purely pragmatic and empirical methods derived from the tradition of taxation in respective areas were beginning to be adopted.

But, the rent doctrine of the, utilitarian philosophy was not given up in theory. In spite of the purely pragmatic and empirical calculation of rent, the justification of rent theory for the calculation was still given. The justification of the theory though did have practical reasons as over the next decades the idea of defining rights and obligations of the taxpaying cultivators permanently was relegated to the background. But then the scientific calculations of the utilitarianism were again paradoxically submitted to Munro like consideration of Indian heritage and traditions.

The Emerging Vision of the Empire

There was a streak of authoritarianism in English utilitarian thought which developed abroad into fullfledged despotism. Utilitarianism in India despite being born in the tradition of liberalism could never accept a democratic government in India. James Mill consistently opposed any form of representative government in India, then or in near future.

The consolidation of the empire under Dalhousie was to take the paradoxes of the various kinds of perceptions of British India still more forward.

Dalhousie took forward Mill's vision of belligerent advancement of Britain's mission, in his policy towards the native Indian States. Again, in the true Benthamite tradition he created 'all India' departments with single heads for Post and Telegraph Services, the Public Work Department, etc. He was thus to give fruition to the idea of efficient administration within the framework of a unitary all India empire. This latter was in direct contrast to Munro's vision of India as loose federation of regional entities.

At the same time Dalhousie was prepared to take a liberal stance in some respects. For example, he was to encourage the development of his legislative council into a forum for the representation of non-official opinion. He also provided it with elaborate rules of procedure taken from the English Parliament. He even favoured the admission of Indian members into the legislative council. He agreed with the Macaulay's view of diffusion of English education and along with his colleague Thomason encouraged a system of vernacular education at mass level.

However this impulse to link the task of changing the Indian society to the tasks of law, landed property or education gradually declined. With the consolidation of law codes revenue administration and education and the all India Empire, the focus shifted to efficiency of governance. Pragmatism with rationality and efficiency now dominated the British administration. Utilitarian arguments were still used for governance, for example in the change of law codes under Macaulay. But the overall spirit of reform declined.

The later British administrators of our period were to emphasise that the British rule had always been governed by law. However, it was argued then, for efficient administration force had to be used and there was no need to justify it by consideration of political change or reform. The utilitarian task of transforming India then was subsumed under the principle of an efficient and good government held up by the 'steel frame' of British administration.

Check Your Progress 2

1. Why was Munro critical of Cornwallis?

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2. How did Bentinck want to bring about a social change in India?

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3. Was James Mill in favour of a democracy in India?

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4. How did the Utilitarians try to solve the problem of land-revenue?

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5. Did Dalhousie want to retain the indigenous states?

5.7 LET US SUM UP

Each regime needs a rationale. We saw in this Unit that, in the era of her expansion in India Britain found hers in a 'civilizing mission'. On the one hand, it served to glorify rather sordid history of greed and aggression and plunder. On the other hand, it instilled in all manner of men a greater sense of purpose. This purpose was not the same to all men. As we have seen, Orientalists like William Jones, Evangelists like Charles Grant, Utilitarians like James Mill, and again a Munro or a Dalhousie had quite different purposes in mind. There were also substantial differences between the modes of thinking in the Orientalist construction of India, or the Evangelical drive to save 'native' souls, or the Utilitarian calculus of the 'greatest goods' in terms of moral and material improvement. Yet, in this diversity of ideas an over-arching conception of Britain's 'mission' in India provided unity in action. Objectively these ideas and men all served to build the British Empire in India.

5.8 KEY WORDS

Evangelicalism: A Protestant Christian movement in England of 18th century, which in contrast to the orthodox church emphasized on personal experiences, individual reading of gospel rather than the traditions of established church.

Paradox: Self contradictory statement, belief etc.

5.9 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES

Check Your Progress 1

- 2) See Sub-sec. 5.3.1.
- 2) See Sec. 5.3., Sub-sec. 5.3.2.
- 3) See Sec. 5.5.

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) See Sub-sec. 5.5.2.
- 2) See Sub-sec. 5.6.1.
- 3) See Sub-sec. 5.6.3.
- 4) See Sub-section 5.6.2
- 5) See Sub-section 5.6.3



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