

UNIT 1 COLONIAL LEGACY

Structure

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1.1 INTRODUCTION

Latin America is usually studied as a single regional entity, even though there is a lot of diversity in the region between and among countries of the region. The diversity is apparent in terms of its peoples, societies, geographies and resources. Yet, the countries share common characteristics inherited from their common Iberian past—the language, culture, institutions have all evolved out of the peculiarity of the Latin American social and historical background. The legacies in Latin America—a mixture of indigenous and colonial—have given it various cultural flavours. The Iberian socio-political tradition with strong roots in Roman Catholic law and Catholicism make it very different from the British colonial legacy of North America.

Although Latin American countries are a part of the Western capitalist world economy, it has received few of its benefits and, to that extent, cannot be treated as part of the Western world. According to some observers, Latin America does not belong to the category of the Third World countries, being a shade more developed, yet it cannot be considered a part of the developed world either. Thus Latin America has to be understood in terms of its unique Greco-Roman-Hispanic style and institution and in accordance to the main themes of tradition and development.

1.2 SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC LEGACY

It has to be kept in mind that the colonisation of Latin America was pre-industrial, and the colonising Iberian powers—Spain and Portugal—used the wealth drained from Latin America to finance capitalism in Europe. The mining of silver in the Latin American colonies, for instance, was important for the development of the dynamic European economy. From 1560s and 1570s

the colonial production of silver constituted one of the sectors with the largest scale of production and the most intensive use of capital in the world economy of that time.

Colonialism resulted in the conversion of indigenous people of the *Aztecs* and the *Incas* into an impoverished and oppressed class of Indian peasantry. The *conquistadores* (conquerors) sought to exploit the labour of the indigenous Amerindian population to make their fortune. Amerindians were confined to their villages or they were sent to work on the mines in Mexico and Peru. In the last quarter of the 16th Century an agrarian structure of the colonial type emerged. Following the invasion of the Spanish forces, the existing structure and demographic dynamics were destroyed. What emerged was a rigid socio-economic two-class structure of the Spanish overlords and the indigenous populations of peasants based on an agrarian economy. These were the semi-feudal *encomienda/hacienda* and the capitalist plantations. Under the *encomienda* system, the Crown granted the right of Indian labour to the *conquistadores* with the obligation to evangelise the Indian population. These grants of land could not be inherited except by special permission. There were many abuses of the system as Spain was far away and unable to enforce its edicts and it soon resulted in the grants of labour becoming *de facto* grants of land.

Thus, whereas feudalism had begun to fade away from Europe, it found a new lease of life in Latin America. Land was granted by the Spanish Crown to reward the *conquistadores* and the lower nobility in order to buy their loyalty to keep them from rebelling against the Crown as well as increase the Crown's influence and conquest over the New World. The need for Indian labour resulted in the introduction of *repartimiento* (division) of Indian labour under which the officials had the right to allocate labour for public work which included work on private estates and ranches and mines. This forced labour was rationalised on grounds that even the ancient Inca rulers in Peru had used forced labour called *mita*. On one side were the vast lands and on the other small subsistence-size plots on which the peasants eked out an existence. The principal characteristics of this structure were the existence of two territories with differentiated populations and functions. These were linked together through regulations controlled by the state. This kind of an excessive exploitation led to the decimation of the indigenous population in thousands. To replenish labour, over time African slaves were transported from across the Atlantic.

The Portuguese were the first European nation to make slave raids on the west coast of Africa or to purchase slaves from African chiefs on the west coast. In Brazil and the Caribbean region, slave-plantation systems were established with large-scale importation of African slaves. Portuguese colonisation was carried out in a similar manner, but the process was more relaxed, easy-going and largely limited to the coast. The whites were considered superior to the browns and the blacks. Slave labour and other forms of exploitation found justification in the practice of racialism.

The Atlantic slave trade lasted from 1451 to 1870 and about 10 million slaves were transported. Of the total number transported, Spanish America accounted for 1.6 million, Brazil for 3.6 million, British colonies (including USA) for 2 million and the French Caribbean 1.6 million. Slave-based plantations supported the industrial revolution in Britain by keeping the flow of commodities and capital. The plantations produced rum, sugar and other tropical products sold to Britain and northern Britain colonies and obtained many of the manufactures from Britain.

The later *hacienda* system evolved out of this agrarian structure patterned to suit the interests of the colonisers. It was a socially, politically, economically and religiously self-contained unit. The

hacendado had complete lordship over the estate. The peasants who worked the *hacienda* were totally under his tutelage. It was a feudal system as well as a capitalist enterprise as it generated wealth for the lord. It produced commodities like coffee, sugar and tobacco for the world market.

Society thus was highly stratified and hierarchical, racial and strictly based on colour. Authority was exercised by various royal officials be it the *encomenderos*, or the *corregidores*. The Whites were at the top of the social ladder. These included the Spaniards (born in Spain) followed by the *criollo*, who were people of Spanish origin born in Latin America. These were the landed aristocracy and the immigrant European merchants. At the bottom of the ladder were the indigenous peoples or Amerindians (the original inhabitants of the Americas) followed by the slaves imported from Africa. In between were the *mulattos*, the offspring of the *criollo* and the blacks. Similarly the offspring of the whites and the Amerindians were the *mestizos*, who were placed higher than the *mulattos* in the social order. The structure of society was closer to feudal Europe except that the landlords were the subjects of the Crown rather than vassals. Their aims too were mercantile rather than to extend their own political power. The condition of the Amerindian population though was perhaps as bad as or worse than those of the serfs in Europe.

It was here with the colonial economic and social structure that Latin America's unfortunate history of dependency took roots. The economy remained subordinate to the economic needs of Europe as it had throughout the colonial period of Europe. It became even more entangled with international capitalism. The very institutions of the *hacienda* and the plantations with the curious mix of feudalism and capitalism that the elite preserved perpetuated dependency and continued the economic dependency of Latin America.

The upper class in the entire region was focussing on strengthening the landed oligarchy and adapting themselves to the requirements of advancing capitalism in Europe mainly Britain. The Latin American countries with their abundant natural resources were pressed into service with burgeoning capitalist centres. They exported raw materials to Europe and the United States catering to their unpredictable markets. The governing elite related to the landowners and merchants selected policies for growth rather than those for development. Development would have meant a change in the structure and institutions governing land and labour, which would not suit their purposes.

1.3 POLITICAL LEGACY

The conquest of Latin America was more a military campaign carried out by *conquistadores*. This meant that they did not settle down with their families, but came alone intermingling with the population and not as racially prejudiced as the colonisers of North America. The sheer number of indigenous peoples in Latin America meant that they could not be completely annihilated and therefore had to be assimilated. The larger indigenous civilisations too had a hierarchical structure and the Spaniards replaced it with a hierarchy of their own.

The Latin American tradition of political absolutism and arbitrary rule had its roots in the Spanish colonial legacy. The Aztec, Inca and Mayan traditions and civilisations were very strongly established and thus the clash of Spanish and indigenous cultures resulted in an interactive process and a complex mix of both cultures though the Spanish was the dominant one. The Spanish semi-

feudal institutions affected Latin American areas in different ways. The areas where the Indian presence was strong were very badly affected by the colonial presence and found it difficult to develop, modernise and democratise, whereas in areas where the Spanish presence was weaker, there developed a stronger sense of self-reliance.

In many ways, Latin America is still weighed down by the burden of the past. Authoritarianism, elitism, a two-class system, hierarchy, patrimonialism, corporatism and militarism proved to be durable features in this region.

1.3.1 Centralisation of Authority

More difficult than colonisation was the task of administering these colonies which were at a great distance from Spain and Portugal. For this purpose, the Spanish Crown designated “viceroys” in place of the king to be located in Mexico City (1535), Lima (1544) and later in New Granada (Colombia, 1739) and the River Plate (Argentina, 1776). The political tradition was one of authoritarian and patrimonial rule and it was absolutist and centralised to the core. Power emanated top down from the King to the viceroy to the *hacendado* or the landowner. Beneath the viceroy came the major corporate and vested interests: the Church, the military and the elite. Each owed loyalty to the king and constituted his right arm in religious, military and economic affairs. The structure was thus vertically organised, all similarly authoritarian and hierarchical in nature but ultimately subservient to the Crown. A series of councils called *audiencias* assisted the viceroys. They also functioned as regional courts of appeal. At a lower administrative level than the *audiencias* were local governors, some of them in charge of large frontier regions and others, of lesser rank, administering towns and villages. This system of governance did not function smoothly and nor could it have done so, given the distance and the vastness of the area being administered. However, the fact that the system functioned at all, was itself a big achievement. Portugal too set up a similar system of administration in Brazil, but it was never as powerful as the Spanish one. But both the systems showed signs of corruption and a tendency of the officials to prevent others from intruding into their powers. Most of the colonisers saw this as an opportunity to enrich themselves, be it the *encomenderos*, the *corregidores* or the officials of the *audiencias*.

Even with independence, this tendency towards a centralisation of powers continued even while rival *caudillos* (men on horseback with their own private armies) representing Liberal or Conservative factions vied for power. The elite, having benefited from the colonial institutions, were not willing to let go. They were still dependent on their Iberian past, culturally on France and economically on Britain. This attitude set the course on which Latin America is placed to this date. Faced with the question of what kind of government their countries should have they chose to institutionalise the past rather than change it. They confused their own personal interest with the national interest. Brazil and Chile managed to maintain a semblance of order. Argentina and Mexico took more than half a century to do so. Except Brazil, most of the nations chose a republican form of government in which almost all powers were placed in the hands of the President. A few elite picked out the president who more often than not, did not even pretend to represent the people. In Brazil, a powerful emperor ruled for most of the 19th Century. The old landed classes joined hands with the new commercially active classes to form a strong oligarchic rule. Law and order were established at times brutally and a new type of *caudillo* emerged who was not interested in power for the sake of power but wanted order, scientific and economic progress and national development. Early 20th Century was the period of nationalist propaganda

and populism. Regimes of populist leaders like Juan Domingo Perón of Argentina and Getúlio Vargas of Brazil can be taken as examples of this kind of nationalism. With the economic crash of 1929, came a rash of revolutions in Latin America, which signalled the way for another round of military coups.

1.3.2 Role of the Church

It is said that the Americas were conquered for the sake of gold and God. It was believed that Spain had been given the task of conquering the Americas in order to spread the Christian faith. The zeal resulted in many attempts to convert Amerindians in the first few decades after colonisation. Missionaries from the Franciscan, Dominican and Augustinian orders were set to work in Spain's colonies.

The religious institutions of Catholicism bolstered and reinforced the state concepts and were also used as an instrument of conquest. The Spanish Church was more intolerant and absolutist than its European counterparts. In Spain, the Church was more than just a religion; it was the backbone of the regime. They played a major role in the politics of Latin America along with the military and landed interests. While it was traditionally one of the main sectors of the Spanish and Portuguese traditional societies, the role of the church has started changing. One of the main changes is the subscription to "liberation theology" which emphasises that the church should actively take a stance against repression and violence. It advocated equality of all believers with a minimal involvement of priests. But most do not follow this doctrine of liberation theology as they feel concerned about the loss of the traditional authority and erosion of hierarchical power. The traditional church elite with social origins in the upper class would prefer *status quo*. The church is still involved in politics carrying on with its traditional functions of giving religious instructions in school, and running parochial high schools and universities. While some scholars argue that the church is no longer as influential as the military and the wealthy landed class, others are of the view that the church continues to remain as powerful and influential as before.

1.3.3 Military

In the post-1930 period the oligarchic power structure extended to include the business, middle and labour sectors. The size of the middle sector expanded and skilled workers and labourers were differentiated from the agrarian class. But even then, the hierarchical pyramidal structure was retained, the top down rule by the elite remained intact and the line maintaining the two-class social structure was sharply drawn.

The military which came into being during the wars of independence was one of the most important groups after independence and it retained its importance. So much so, in Latin America the military became active in politics. It was felt that not only professionalism should be encouraged to teach officers warfare skills but also to be interested in political matters. The military is required to help solve national problems including socio-economic reforms that would prevent insurgency. This has resulted in what has been called "bureaucratic authoritarianism" or the rule of the military on a long-term basis. This was based on the idea that the military could govern better than the civilians. This period lasted from mid-1960s to late 1970s. In Latin America, the governments were quite frequently the coalitions of military and civilian factions. Some aspects of life which are unmistakably "Latin American" are military coups, military leaders being elected as presidents, and the say of the military in non-military matters. The military has thus become one of the

traditional pillars of Latin American society with rights, responsibilities and a legal standing that can be traced back to colonial times.

1.4 CULTURAL LEGACY

Latin American political culture has been historically elitist hierarchical, authoritarian, corporatist and patrimonialist. The elitism in Latin American society stems from the Iberian tradition of nobility of the medieval ages. Spanish political thought at the time argued that society should be governed by natural elite and was skeptical of the capacity of the masses to form a successful government. While a new set of liberal ideas were superimposed on the traditional ones in the 19th Century, it is not certain to what extent they took root. Egalitarian, republican, secular and rationalist ideas were often incorporated in laws and constitutions but the underlying structures of landownership and authority remained elitist.

1.4.1 Positivism

In the second half of the 19th Century, positivist ideology dominated most of Latin America especially amongst the elite and the rising middle class. In their thinking, positivism was based on scientific thought and was a move towards progress and development. For example, the construction of roads and railways was of prime importance. This material “progress” was taken to an extent that the elite wanted to mimic and transform their cities into replicas of the cities in Europe. Industrialisation was viewed as the key to advancement. Since the emphasis was on material growth and well being, positivism had a capitalist mentality and was very different from the communal spirit prevalent amongst the indigenous people of Latin America.

What is important to bear in mind here is the fact that the state had assumed an important role in Latin American countries directing progress. The elite naturally viewed the private accumulation of wealth as an instrument for progress and emphasised on political order in order to retain control. So much so, positivism was almost considered an official doctrine under the rule of Porfirio Díaz in Mexico (1876-1911). Some of his ministers were called *científicos* and offered scientific solutions to the problems confronting the nation. All this was a legacy of the colonial society. The size and power of the *latifundia* (huge estates) increased and they all started exporting more in order to meet the demand of modernisation. This in turn only contributed to deepening dependency. Each nation or region was dependent on producing one or more exports to earn enough to import modern technology. Brazil produced coffee, Chile produced nitrates and copper, Bolivia produced tin and Argentina beef and wheat. For the masses in Latin America, progress resulted in further impoverishment as they bore the burden of inequitable distribution structures

1.4.2 Education

Intellectual life and educational system in Latin America too were grounded on similar principles. Education was private and reserved only for the elite. The hierarchical system was premised on the non-egalitarian principle that there was no need for educating the masses. Education was based on rote memorisation, was deductive and had no sense of science, empiricism or observation. It was infused with Catholic and Thomistic premises.

1.5 IDEAS AND PERSONALITIES ---

1.5.1 Independence Movements

In the 18th Century, Spain under the rule of the Bourbons made an attempt to assert its authority in Latin America. In an effort to give trade a boost, some restrictions on trade were removed, like those on trade between Mexico and Peru. With the improvements in production and trade in the early 19th Century, the increase in demand emanating from an industrialising Europe the *Criollos* were open to the possibilities of freer trade without the control or authority of the Crown. The commercial restrictions placed by the Crown along with a rigid administrative structure were not appreciated. The relative isolation of the colonies only added to the general discontent. This set the stage for the wars of liberation of the Spanish colonies from 1810. However, it was Napoleon Bonaparte's invasion of Spain and the placement of Joseph Bonaparte on the throne which was the immediate cause of the wars in Latin America. For the Spanish colonists, a French King could not be their legitimate ruler. *Criollos*, both liberal and conservative formed committees or *juntas* declaring loyalty to their Spanish King and claimed rule on the king's behalf.

The Latin American Wars of Independence can be said to have taken place between 1810 and 1825. The first phase of this war from 1810-1815 was not very successful and some very tentative efforts were made towards achieving independence characterised by inexperience and idealism. The second phase of the war from 1815-1825 was military in nature ending in triumph for the struggle for independence.

1.5.2 Miguel Hidalgo

A *Criollo* junta in Mexico City which was the administrative centre of New Spain declared independence. New Spain extended from Panama in the south to the territories of California, New Mexico and Texas towards the north. The *Criollos* were interested in maintaining their property and status vis-à-vis Mexico's vast numbers of Indians and *mestizos*. A sixty-year-old *Criollo* priest and intellectual, Miguel Hidalgo, fighting for the rights of the indigenous and *mestizo* population and the return of lands taken from the indigenous peoples had a more radical response to events. Influenced by the Enlightenment he dismissed popular notions concerning race. In the wake of the more conservative independence movement in Mexico City, he organised an uprising in December 1810. But by September he learned that the Spanish authorities were going to preempt his move by sending forces against him. Hidalgo and his followers, with their farm tools as weapons, marched northwest calling the Indian and *mestizo* followers to action. The militia of San Miguel too joined Hidalgo's army. Even though they met with resistance farther northwest, the army moved on taking one town after another till they reached Guadalajara. Here, Hidalgo set up a small government and began training his army. Hidalgo was eventually captured by the enemy camp. He was tried by the Inquisition, defrocked and executed by firing squad at Dolores on 31 July 1811. The uprising to 1816 had killed between 200 thousand and 500 thousand people.

1.5.3 Simon Bolivar

Simon Bolivar was part of the *creme de la creme* of Venezuela's elite. Part of his education was carried out in Spain. A diplomatic mission to London with Bolivar at its head marked the beginning

of his career as a public servant on behalf of freedom and independence. During the first phase of the Wars of Independence, Bolívar experienced some set back in his political and military career in an inauspicious manner by losing the Puerto Cabello to the Royalists during the Venezuelan First Republic. He escaped to New Granada (present-day Colombia) to avoid prison and recouped his forces there. By 1813 Bolívar was back in Venezuela declaring a war against the authority of Spain and instituted the Venezuelan Second Republic with himself as its head from Caracas. The Second Republic collapsed within a few months, however, because Bolívar had failed to win the support of the non-whites, many of whom were instead recruited to fight with those loyal to the king. By 1814, the Spanish king had regained the throne from the French. Bolívar realised that his revolutionary ideas had to appeal to the *Creoles* as most would be torn between independence and loyalty to their king. Working on this premise Bolívar gave his republican ideals a conservative slant.

Between 1815 and 1825, Bolívar harnessed international support and his own continental vision into a winning strategy. Bolívar believed that South America had to follow its own model of independence and governance. Political institutions in countries in South America had not been given the opportunity to develop and mature because of Spanish hegemonism. In order to progress towards independence and electoral democracy, South America should “not adopt the best system of government, but the one that is most likely to succeed.” Thus along with José de San Martín, Bolívar decided to fight for independence—San Martín in the south, and Bolívar in the north.

In 1817 Simón Bolívar had returned to Venezuela to again fight for its independence. And starting in the west, took the strategic town of Angostura. This time in Venezuela, Bolívar widened his ethnic base by providing incentives to the indigenous peoples and the black slaves. He gained the assistance of the *llaneros*, who had been conducting a guerrilla war against the royalists. One of his main achievements was the victory at Boyacá which enabled him to occupy Bogotá by 1819. This in turn liberated New Granada, and in December the independence of all the provinces of the viceroyalty was declared and Gran Colombia (which encompasses present-day Venezuela, Colombia, Panama, and Ecuador) was created with Simón Bolívar as president.

In June 1821, Bolívar won the battle of Carabobo, and when Caracas fell a few days later, Venezuela was finally completely free from Spanish rule. Bolívar next went south and conquered the province of Quito. On 27 July 1822, Simon Bolívar and José de San Martín met at the city of Guayaquil. Bolívar came in as the triumphant leader of a series of resounding military victories and the head of the vast new Gran (Greater) Colombia. San Martín on the other hand was struggling with his campaign in Peru and his control in Chile was uncertain. Bolívar was in a far superior position, so after their secret discussions, San Martín left South America altogether and went to Europe. Bolívar’s political victory over San Martín signified the demise of monarchism as an option for a post-independence settlement.

Bolívar desired an even larger union, which would include Chile, Bolivia and Peru. However, deep divisions between Venezuelans and Colombians and the differences between centralists and federalists made it an extremely daunting task. He tried to overcome these problems by declaring a dictatorship in 1825 but eventually lost his prestige and died by 1830.

1.5.4 José de San Martín

Jose de San Martin, also known as Argentina's liberator was one of the principal liberators of South America from Spanish rule. He was a master of military strategy, a skill which led him to success. San Martin was educated at the "Seminario de Nobles" in Spain from 1785 until 1789. He started his military career early in the Murcia infantry regiment (South Eastern Spain) and served as an army officer against the forces of Napoleon between 1808 and 1811.

While San Martin was loyal towards Spain when he fought against Napoleon, like Simon Bolivar, he disliked the traditional absolute monarchy and the existing colonial system. In 1811, he decided to resign from Spanish service. After meeting revolutionary Spanish Americans in London, England, he sailed for Buenos Aires, and was almost immediately taken into service in the revolutionary regime. As a very experienced soldier, he was a great asset in the revolutionary movement in South America.

In 1812, he was given the task of organising an armed force to be used against the Spanish royalists in Peru threatening the government of Argentina. After his marriage to Maria de los Remedios Escalada who came from an Argentine upper-class family of Spanish blood, San Martin became more involved in internal politics of the area. He helped form the "Lautaro Lodge", an underground movement which later aligned itself with the opposition to the government that was in power.

In 1816, when representatives of the Argentine provinces met at the Congress of Tucuman, San Martin chose the side of an outright declaration of independence from Spain. He believed that a liberal-constitutional monarchy was the best hope for stability in the new nations of Spanish America. Meanwhile San Martin was still making plans to facilitate the overthrow of the royalists in Peru. He felt that the best way to do so would be to enter Peru through the Andean mountains even though it was the most difficult. He did so, and won the battle at Maipu in 1818 defeating the royalists in Chile. He tried to negotiate with the royalists in Peru proposing an independent monarchy but the negotiations failed. Forced to resort to military means, he devised a sea attack along with rebel Chilean troops. Peru was formally declared independent on July 28, 1921, with San Martin being named the "Protector of Peru".

He did not take power, instead he met with fellow liberator Simon Bolivar at Guayquil in 1822, and Bolivar persuaded him to withdraw from Peru. They both disagreed on the type of government that was to be formed, but they were both committed to South American independence, and were both willing to continue the revolution. On September 20, 1822, San Martin reassigned his military command in Peru, and went into voluntary exile in Europe. After that he retired to Europe giving moral support to the supporters of the American sovereignty independence. He died in France in August 1870.

1.6 SUMMARY

Latin America is considered as a prisoner of its own colonial legacy that still continues in some aspects to the present day. Authoritarianism, elitism, a two-class system, hierarchy, patrimonialism, corporatism and militarism have proved to be durable features in this region. All political, economic structures of the colonial period were supported by the social structures and ideas prevalent at the time. These were the semi-feudal *encomienda*/*hacienda* and the capitalist plantations patterned to suit the interests of the colonisers. The history of dependency of Latin America can be traced back to this period. The political legacy of Latin American colonial rule has been centralisation of

authority (with powers being vested from the King to the Viceroy to the *hacendado* or the landowners), role of the Church which reinforced absolutism and rationalised conquest, and the military which has become active in politics and felt it essential to help solve national problems including socio-economic reforms. The educational and cultural outlook in Latin America was not much different from the political and socio-economic one. While governance was elitist and not mass-based, education and intellectual life too were grounded on similar principles and reserved for the elite.

The wars of independence in Latin America were an effort on the part of the *Criollos* to gain independence from the control that the Crown (Spain and Portugal) exercised over them. The possibilities of freer trade and removal of restrictions placed by the administrative structure of the Crown was not appreciated. Most of those fighting for independence belonged to the elitist class—Simon Bolivar and Jose de San Martin. But there were some among them like Miguel Hidalgo who also fought for the rights of the indigenous and *mestizo* population.

1.7 EXERCISES

1. In what way has the colonial economic structure of Latin America impacted on the socio-economic development of the entire region?
2. What are the strands of continuity perceived in the development of the political structure of Latin America from colonial times?
3. Write a brief note on positivism in Latin America.
4. Describe the ideas and circumstances that led to the independence movements in Latin America.