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Thoughts, Ideologies and Public Policies

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*- Chief & Executive Editor*





## British Policies during Transition: A Study of the Social Policies in 19<sup>th</sup> Century Western India

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### Abstract:

*The Marathas were defeated by the British in the Third Anglo-Maratha War in 1818. With this administration of the Maratha country fell in the hands of the British administrators. Bajirao II, who headed the Maratha power at this crucial juncture, lacked leadership qualities. The administration of both these Governments was based on different principles and policies. During such a crucial period of transition from the Maratha Government to the British Government, the policies which were the British were to bring in was going to decide the fate of their rule here in Western India. In this paper, therefore, a study of the social policies in nineteenth century western India has been done to understand the challenges faced by the new rulers to administer a region which was traditionally very independent in rule and mind.*

**Key Words:** British Rule, Social Policies, Ideological influences, Transition, Social Reform

### Introduction:

A Public policy, broadly put, is a combination of need and problem-oriented approach taken by governments or rulers in response to the challenges faced by them and thereby provide solutions for the same to enable an effective and efficient handling of administrative affairs of the territory under their rule. This was formalised by and large due to a need for coordinated efforts for the well-being of the people at large.

With the defeat of the Marathas by the British in the Third Anglo-Maratha War in 1818 the reins of administering the Maratha country fell in the hands of the British administrators. The Maratha power at this crucial juncture was headed by Bajirao II who lacked leadership qualities. He could not succeed in preventing the 'final act of destruction of the Maratha power' as opposed to the 'brilliant achievements in diplomacy and statecraft' showcased by the British residents in Pune – Palmer, Close and Elphinstone.<sup>1</sup> This was a transitional phase of this period — a transition from the Maratha Government to the British Government. The administration of both these Governments was based on different principles and policies. Initially the British tried to continue some of the policies of the Maratha Government in order to prevent the development of antagonistic feelings among the people. Captain Henry Dundas Robertson who was appointed Collector of Poona, in fact says that he was perfectly satisfied that the people of his district were much pleased at finding the change of Government had made but little change in their feelings or relations towards each other as members of society.<sup>2</sup>

### Ideological Influences on Framing of the British Policies

By the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, various schools of thought openly contended to reform India which guided the framing of the East India Company's attitudes and policies. Edmund Burke, a Conservative, propagated that India should be administered in accordance with the existing traditions and institutions'.<sup>3</sup> According to the Conservatives, a policy of restraint, responsibility and a corruption-free administration should be advocated by the Company. At the



same time, Imperial attitudes towards India started emerging. According to G. D. Bearce, Imperial attitudes more often came from policies and action than a comprehensive statement of theory. Lord Cornwallis though personally inclined to Conservatism, pursued an essentially imperial policy in India. His task was not to preserve the principles and institutions existing in India but to introduce British principles and British institutions in India.<sup>4</sup> His successors believed that the Indian economy had to be promoted to strengthen the empire. In addition to that, the joint prosperity of both Britain and India had to be the chief goal of imperial policy.<sup>5</sup> To maintain the empire or to expand it reluctantly, to enjoy the benefits of trade but not to develop the commercial possibilities of India, and to rule the country without introducing many changes constituted the characteristic imperial attitude.<sup>6</sup> There were several new intellectual currents in Britain which propagated both improvement and reform. Evangelicalism advocated the permanence of British rule so that Indians could get the benefit of good government in keeping with the "best ideas of their age".<sup>7</sup> This was also the age of British Liberalism. That the British administrators' task was to civilise rather than conquer was Thomas Macaulay's liberal vision, which set a liberal agenda for the emancipation of India through active governance.<sup>8</sup> Utilitarian philosophy condemned interference in the name of social and economic liberty by the State, in the affairs of the community. It was believed that the things necessary to bring about significant changes in India would be: an improvement in the intellectual level of society, the growth of western liberty, the modernisation of law, and the establishment of an orderly and rational government on Utilitarian lines. They also believed that these intellectual and political reforms should be followed by social and economic changes which had not been very well fulfilled.<sup>9</sup> The growth of Romanticism in Europe in the early 1800s brought to India a new kind of awareness that enhanced the appeal of a more personal style of rule. Romanticism with its belief in impersonal laws and limited government challenged the Cornwallis system with its focus on the emotions and the glories of the past, its lack of trust of pretence, uniformity and abstract learning, and its concern for individual introspection. As a whole, what the Romantics revealed were some basic British sentiments about India. There was nothing to serve as a guide to British policy. They showed what they liked about India – wealth, entertainment, scenery, and adventure – and what they disliked – social and political institutions that weren't British. In Thomas Munro, this romanticism resulted in something more important politically. It was a sympathetic approach towards India and a readiness to accept conditions as an authentic expression of the human spirit. Over a period of time, it became clear that an imperial policy in the age of Liberality had to be conducted with humanity. To the British public and its political leaders the best justification for their expansion in India was to accomplish Liberal and Humanitarian reforms. Thus, the combination of imperialism and progress became 'the mature policy of the empire'.<sup>10</sup>

The British mainly depended on their thoughts and experiences rather than their knowledge of India while forming their attitudes towards India. Amidst such prevailing doubts, a bunch of enlightened, dedicated and decisive administrators like Thomas Munro, Mountstuart Elphinstone, etc. arose. These officers, while being totally committed to the Company and British interests, were equally empathetic to the needs of the people. From their Indian experiences, these officers learnt on how the country should be judged and governed. They understood the languages, the customs and sentiments of the Indian people. However, this Indian influence over British attitudes waned towards the end mainly because of imperialism and westernisation becoming predominant in British minds.<sup>11</sup> As Meera Singh rightly says, these



officers as men in charge, allowed pragmatism and humanitarianism to reign supreme. 'Restraint, continuity and caution were their watchwords, and evolution their methodology'.<sup>12</sup> These men imparted a personal warmth and paternal touch to the administration. To possess power but not exercise it was a difficult task, but from 1818-1840, these administrators upheld the existing institutions.

This paper is confined only to the study of social policies of the British during the transitionary phase. This might help answer the question raised in a contemporary editorial of the newspaper, *The Hindu*, dated 16 April, 1894, as to 'What is the greatest boon of the British rule?'.<sup>13</sup>

### **Social Policies of the British during Transition in Western India**

In the initial years, Thomas Munro worked to preserve Indian institutions and customs. In his opinion, a statesman had to begin by appreciating the people and understanding their wants. He cannot be prejudiced and begin by praising everything British and depreciating everything Indian.<sup>14</sup> Of all Munro's supporters, Mountstuart Elphinstone, appointed as Commissioner of the Deccan, proved to be the most enthusiastic advocate of his policies. Elphinstone expressed a belief, similar to that of Munro's when he said, "It is not enough to give new laws, or even good courts; you must take the people along with you and give them a share in your feelings, which can be done by sharing theirs".<sup>15</sup> After 1813, the chief concern for Munro and Elphinstone became that of introducing improvements into India. As officials and Governors, they had to deal with practical problems, a result of which was Elphinstone's policy of '**Cautious Innovation**'.

According to Ravinder Kumar, before 1818, the consensus in religious values tying different social groups in an intimate relationship, and the extent to which the Brahmins in general dominated the rest of the society — were the two striking features of society in Maharashtra. The displacement of one social group by another in a position of dominance occurred quite frequently. The vision and the values which inspired the administrative policy of the British beset the task faced by them with serious difficulties. Elphinstone believed that natural innovation as opposed to artificial innovation was based on the principle of continuity in the processes of change. He further believed progress to be an affirmation of the ideals and objectives which formed the moral basis of a community.

Elphinstone's view of social change in Maharashtra presented him with a serious dilemma. On the one hand was his belief in an intimate relationship between the moral principles which sustained a community and on the other, were its social and political institutions. Elphinstone could not initiate reforms which he considered desirable and essential without forcing the pace of social progress and without violating the principles of natural innovation.<sup>16</sup> What had characterised the work of improvement in the early nineteenth century — Caution and gradualness — was later replaced by immediate and rapid enactment of reforms. The fundamental theory on which these early British administrators functioned was the philosophy of proceeding slowly until the people of India were ready for a change. This theory, they believed, which would guide the direction of Indian reform had to be ultimately derived from Britain. However, this did not mean that Indian opinion and experience was going to be wholly disregarded.<sup>17</sup>

The introduction of Western ideas and learning had a major effect on the Indian society and culture. This was especially emphasised by the British after about 1800. Thus the journey of the transformation of India into a 'modern nation' by the British began. The Indians were



definitely discerning in their use of the social and cultural ideas of the West. Essentially, the Indian mind remained deeply rooted in the traditional religious beliefs of the country. Fortunately the British maintained the belief in their own attitudes that intellectual and spiritual changes must be voluntary. 'In the end Indians preserved what was useful in their own traditions and adapted what was necessary from the West'.<sup>18</sup>

As British rule progressed, humanitarianism and rationality became deeper, broader and more powerful.<sup>19</sup> They were quite cautious towards certain socio-religious practices like sati. Though they hoped for an eventual abandonment of the practice they allowed officials only the function of dissuading widows from burning themselves as they were still governed by their policy of 'No Innovations'. The British believed that the abolition of the practice would have to come from Indians themselves. They would have to avoid an outright abolition of sati as their priority was the stability of British rule.<sup>20</sup> However, Captain Robertson, Collector of Poona, made untiring efforts at convincing the widows, the Shastris, and the people of this inhuman practice. These efforts were made as early as 1819 in Pune.<sup>20a</sup> This process of the prevention of Satis began much before the Prohibition of Sati Act was actually passed in 1829. The British could not comprehend this practice and found it to be abominable. This was completely in contrast with the rationalism they were brought up with. The religion and culture of the British was completely different from what they saw and experienced in India. They were products of a culture which was guided by logic behind every action. Hence they found it extremely difficult to digest such inhumane, illogical and irrational behaviour. However, they were also aware that touching the people of this country on the point of religion would pave for them a way back to Britain. Hence 'Caution' was to be their watchword.

The attitude of the officials in power is brought out well in this statement: 'In native opinion the voluntary nature of the act of Suttee diminishes the right of the Government to interfere and it must be remembered that the safety and the expediency of suppressing the practice must be judged by referring chiefly to native and not European habits of thinking'.<sup>21</sup> By saying this were they trying to justify their stand — is a thing which makes one wonder.

Improved education among the people was the only ray of hope for the British Government to help them put an end to this practice. Spread of education was hoped by the Government to be the great solvent of all superstition.<sup>22</sup> They believed that the success which arose from 'increased intelligence among the people would be the most acceptable form in which the cessation of the practice could be exhibited'.<sup>23</sup> Chaplin too felt that education was the best remedy — '...I fear we cannot hope to subdue prejudices which have taken so deep a root except by means of a long and gradual process of improvement in knowledge, which can alone subvert such superstitious ceremonies'.<sup>24</sup> The impact of western education was soon evident when some liberal Indians criticised the penance to be given to the Sati on her courage failing her and coming out live from the funeral pyre as an inhuman and absolute obstinate attitude of the Shastris.<sup>25</sup>

In spite of the initial British attitude of abstaining from all interference with the established customs of the country, the British could not desist the temptation of at least making an effort to convince the people to give up this dreadful practice of Sati.<sup>26</sup> In John Malcolm's farewell minute, he declared that the abolition of satis "must be quoted to our native subjects as an exception to that rigid rule we had prescribed to ourselves, and meant scrupulously to



maintain, as a general principle, of not interfering on any point connected with their religious usages".<sup>27</sup>

As far as education was concerned, Elphinstone wanted to transform Maharashtra into a society which would absorb liberal and rational ideas. He wanted to destroy the Brahmin domination over the profession of teaching. Hence, organisation of education was to be done in a manner which would introduce them to the arts and sciences of the West.<sup>28</sup> For this, Elphinstone would have to again move away from his initial policy of 'No Innovations'. Elphinstone's education policy was based on the gradual introduction of western science and philosophy in the educational institutions created for the Brahmins. As Ravinder Kumar quite aptly stated of Elphinstone's belief that 'Such a policy would create a class of liberal brahmans who would subscribe to the social ideals and the political objectives of the British Government, and who would, therefore, play a creative role in bringing together, the new rulers and the wider community'.<sup>29</sup> According to Elphinstone, the morals of the people could be improved by improving their education. Though there were schools in all towns and in many villages, reading was restricted to a few classes of society. He feared that establishment of free schools, would not alter the circumstances, but would probably create a suspicion of some hidden motives on their part.<sup>30</sup> However, Elphinstone hoped that education would spread knowledge of their principles and opinions and also eradicate prejudices against the British. He declared in 1823 that his aim was not to 'provide clerks for offices but to diffuse knowledge among all orders of the people of this country'.<sup>31</sup>

### Conclusion

The fervour with which Thomas Munro pleaded for the advance of the principles of freedom and progress under the benevolent dominance of the British rule in the East was quite remarkable.<sup>32</sup>

As a means to providing freedom and progress, education was made open to all. Through this the British tried to remove the obstacles and provide ample facilities for the acquisition of knowledge. With this English education a class of western educated people emerged in Maharashtra. Along with this the impact of introduction of education led to basic literacy levels being achieved among the people that was useful for their day-to-day activities. This also led to loss of the indigenous people's faith in the traditional and religious customs of the country as was expected by the British. Infact the attention of this newly emerged western educated Indian middle class was now drawn to the social conditions which had quite deteriorated.<sup>33</sup> With this the path for a major upheaval in the Indian society was laid out on which walked these social reformers achieving major milestones in the form of the Sati Prohibition Act, Widow Remarriage Act, Age of Consent Bill to name a few.

According to the editorial in The Hindu, "There can be no hesitation in acknowledging that this freedom, this liberty, this tendency to progress, is the greatest boon for which the Indian people are indebted to the British rule and which more than compensates them for the wrongs and injuries that they have now and again suffered from its measures and policies."<sup>34</sup>

The strong foundation of this basic social policy introduced by the early British administrators for the benefit of their subjects based on rationalism and humanitarian ideas speaks volumes of their contribution to the steady advancement of our society. Not only did the





British give us a share in their feelings (as Elphinstone believed in) but they also generously shared a part of their highly developed, progressive and modern outlook of society as they saw it.

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