

# The Impact of British Rule in India

M. S. Rajan

There is a story that when an Indian politician in the course of his electioneering campaign in a rural area claimed that his party had driven out the British and achieved independence for India, a lowly peasant innocently asked: 'But when did the British come to India?' This tale, no doubt apocryphal, is only meant to underline the fact that in India's long history, British rule was but one episode, and one which did not affect or concern every Indian. The whole of India came under direct British governmental authority only about 1850, and this authority had lasted less than 100 years when India became independent on 15 August 1947. Even during this period, more than 500 princely states, some of them larger and more populous than the United Kingdom itself, were outside the jurisdiction of direct British rule. It might therefore appear that Britain had made no permanent or widespread impact on India.

Furthermore, considering that India is an old cultural entity, with a rich civilization and heritage, it might also seem that a small number (compared to India's population) of British civilians and soldiers from thousands of miles away could not have left any lasting impression on the life and outlook of 350 millions of Indians at the end of that rule. All this may in fact become true some centuries from now, just as today it is difficult to identify the impact made by the Mauryas (3rd–2nd century BC) or the Guptas (4th–6th century AD). Indeed, there are many indications, especially since Nehru's death in 1964, that many parts of the British legacy may be altered or modified or thrown out completely, and sooner than many had anticipated only a couple of years ago. But right now, twenty years after British rule ended, the notable fact is that it has left a tremendous legacy in almost all walks of life and in the realm of ideas and beliefs as well.

During the first 50 years of the East India Company's rule in

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parts of India, the British civilian and military officers suffered from insecurity and from the absence of long-term plans for their stay there and for ruling the territories which they had already acquired or were acquiring. They were therefore wary of introducing any radical changes which might antagonize the Indians who lived under their jurisdiction. Many of them also were impressed by, and admired, the Indian civilization, and did not think it desirable or right that Indians should be anglicized. Those among them with intellectual ability and interests also made deep studies of aspects of Indian civilization and published works on these subjects. Others (like Sir Thomas Munro who served the company for 47 years, 1780–1827, and Mountstuart Elphinstone who was, among other things, Governor of Bombay from 1817–27) indeed anticipated the end of British rule and urged measures for the training of Indians in the arts of self-government, so that power could be easily transferred to trained Indian hands. During this period, Indians generally acquiesced in British rule and did not react to it one way or the other.

But in the next phase of the Company's rule, which ended with the Indian Mutiny (1857–8), many British civilian and military servants came to have a sense of the permanence of British rule; the immense power they exercised and their Victorian ideas of imperialism and of the 'white man's burden', the utilitarian philosophy they shared – all this bred in them a contempt for things Indian. This in its turn generated a zealous desire to reform Indian society, which was aided and abetted by the Christian missionaries for their own reasons.

There was a strong reaction to this British attitude and role in India, as in other Asian societies under western rule, a reaction which stimulated a renaissance in Asia; several of its characteristic features, admirably analysed by Panikkar in his *Asia and Western Dominance* (1953), were common to many countries of the continent. First, there was an attempt to reorganize society primarily to adjust traditional relationships (like caste and feudal relationships) which had become obsolete in the new framework of British rule. It was presumably thought that this was the only way of resisting the pressure for change exerted by the western rulers. In the words of Panikkar, 'It was the case of ancient societies calling forth and mobilizing their dormant forces to meet an aggression'.

Second, Indian élites undertook a re-examination of traditional

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and fundamental beliefs about religion and society; old beliefs were given a fresh interpretation, either in order to bring them into conformity with modern requirements or to give them a valid position in a modern context.

Partly in order to meet the British (or western) criticism on its own ground, there was at the same time an attempt to assimilate the learning and thought of the West. With this new learning, which did not necessarily imply the rightness or superiority of the West, interest was stimulated in the revival of Indian religion, and in the indigenous arts, crafts, and institutions.

Lastly, for the first time in India's long history, there came the glimmerings of political consciousness and even a desire among some sections to throw out the new rulers.

All these developments contributed to the great Hindu Reformation of the nineteenth century. After four centuries of Muslim rule and less than half a century of British rule, Hinduism – 'this mighty banyan tree', as Swami Vivekanda called it – was stirred in its depths by the reforms introduced by the British and by the criticism of the Christian missionaries. The foremost leader of this movement of Indian protest and reform was the great Raja Ram Mohan Roy (1772–1833), who stood for preserving the past but also for absorbing the good features of the West; in 1845, Devendranath Tagore established the Brahmo Samaj which later on sought to establish a religion synthesizing Hinduism and Christianity.

The discontent of some sections of Indians with certain aspects of British rule culminated in the Indian Mutiny in 1857; this, while not quite the first war of Indian independence, although it has been called that by some Indians, was (among other things) a many-sided protest against some of the policies and doings of the alien British rulers, especially the imposition of westernization – western education in particular – on an old and civilized society.

Some time after the Mutiny came the movement of Swami Dayanand Saraswati, who issued the call 'back to the Vedas', and established the Arya Samaj (1875) in a militant effort to stem the proselytization of Hindus to Christianity and Islam, and to emphasize that many of the evils in Hinduism which the Christian missionaries attacked had no basis in the ancient Vedas. The Theosophical movement which gained ground in the last quarter

of the nineteenth century was another Indian response to the attempted imposition, and domination, of western religion and culture, even though its founders and leading protagonists were not Indians. The Ramakrishna Mission and the Aurobindo cult which were established in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were on the same lines.

In the post-mutiny period, when the East India Company's rule was replaced by the direct rule of the British Crown and Parliament, the British Indian Government took up a less zealous attitude to reforms affecting Indian society, while at the same time gradually introducing self-governing institutions, even though there was at first no thought in British Government circles of eventually handing over power to Indian hands. There was a mixture of 'toleration and contempt' for things Indian and a policy of 'let sleeping tigers lie', as Guy Wint has put it.

But already during the last quarter of the nineteenth century, many leaders of the new Indian élite, and some thoughtful and friendly Englishmen too, realized that the basic wrong in the Indian situation was that an alien race from thousands of miles away was ruling a territory and people many times larger – and a people which had an ancient civilization of its own, but which, deprived for centuries of political power and in the absence of a centralized direction of its affairs, had lost its moorings. They felt that this root defect, the cause of the malaise, had to be eradicated, and for this purpose, and to direct Indian wishes and aspirations into constitutional channels, they felt that an Indian forum must be established. The Indian National Congress thus came into being in 1885. This organization, which was initially blessed by the British authorities, grew in the twentieth century into a mighty instrument for ending British rule in India. The leaders of the Congress, who were mostly products of the western system of education – Gandhi and Nehru were even educated in Britain – made very effective use of their western learning and political ideas in denouncing an imperial system which was the negation of the freedom and the liberal institutions which were supposed to be the proud heritage of Britain and the West. They demanded for themselves the freedom and the institutions which the alien rulers enjoyed in their home territory, but which were denied to the Indian peoples. They wanted the economic exploitation of India for the benefit of Britain to cease – this was the origin of the

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'drain theory' propounded notably by Dadabhoy Naoroji. They demanded the full utilization of the vast Indian resources already exploited and the even larger potential riches, solely for the benefit and well-being of the Indian people and for the development of the Indian economy. They urged that the alien rulers should respect and help to revive the best of Indian traditional ideas and institutions and suppress the harmful ones (like untouchability). They wanted the Indian languages and literatures, arts and crafts, to be revived and supported, financially and otherwise. In one phrase, they demanded 'India for Indians' and asked the British to 'quit India'. They demanded self-government, not mere good government, which the British claimed to have given India.

It is too soon to be certain about all the reasons for the British quitting India – though obviously the most important was Indian pressure. The drawing up of a fair balance sheet of the 150 years of British rule is an even more formidable task. One need only read, for example, Percival Griffith's *The British Impact on India* (1953) and the more recent book by Ram Gopal, *British Rule in India: An Assessment* (1963) – two typical books which seek to draw up the balance sheet from the British and Indian point of view respectively – to realize how complicated and difficult it is, first of all to identify the various items on the balance sheet and then to apportion due weight to each individual item. At present this seems to be a somewhat premature, if not impossible, task. But an analysis of the lasting impact of British rule in India can be more profitably attempted. This involves an effort at predicting for decades ahead, but the perspective provided by the earlier periods of alien rule in India's long history and their impact on the Indian way of life, does perhaps offer a basis for some reasoned forecasting.

There is, of course, a somewhat cynical view that the changes brought about by the western impact in India (as in other non-western countries) are superficial, and that with the disappearance of western political authority, Asians will revert to their traditional ways. But this view is unfounded. As far as the legacy of British rule is concerned, the British impact on some aspects of Indian life is much too radical and far-reaching to be erased, even if the will to do so were present, which is not always the case. On many other aspects the impact will perhaps not last long, either because it was superficial or because of the revival of India's traditions. Perhaps a good example is the caste system. Until recently, many

had thought (like Panikkar, for instance) that the weakening of caste bonds would be a lasting consequence of British rule. But this has been partly disproved by events since independence, and more especially since the new Constitution came into force on 26 January 1950. While it has lost its social significance, the caste system seems to have acquired some political props in recent years.

Perhaps the single greatest and most enduring impact of British rule over India is that it created an Indian nation, in the modern political sense. After centuries of rule by different dynasties over parts of the Indian sub-continent, and after about 100 years of British rule, Indians ceased to be merely Bengalis, Maharashtrians, or Tamils, linguistically and culturally. The consciousness of being one people with common traditions and an ancient and great civilization, a people different from the alien rulers, inspired them to achieve political unity against alien rule and eventually to win independence. This greatest contribution of British rule, ironically enough, was also the most important of the factors which brought that rule to an end. The consciousness of being Indians later on expanded to an awareness of being Asians as against Europeans, though, unlike the development in some other colonial territories, it did not make Indians racially arrogant.

Related to this, another lasting result of British rule is that, while they unified the country and brought the entire sub-continent under one political authority, when they departed from India they left it in two – India and Pakistan. This is not to say that the blame for the partition is to be laid wholly at the British door, but merely to suggest that the sowing by the British Indian Government in 1909 of the poisonous seeds of separate electorates for Muslims, and the periodical fostering of the plant of separatism, made it eventually grow into a separate (though parasitic) tree which it was impossible to uproot in subsequent years, even had the British wanted to. As long as the Indian nation lasts, its people will associate with British rule this partition of a great and ancient geographical and cultural entity. By one single action, the departing British themselves almost destroyed one of their proudest achievements, the political and administrative unification of a great country.

But only almost. For the territory they left in residual India

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under a single administration is also a lasting achievement of British rule, even given the fact that the merger of almost all the princely states is largely an Indian achievement. The British transferred to Indian hands the Government of India as a going concern, and the writ of the independent Indian Government could and did run throughout the vast length and breadth of truncated post-partition India. The educated classes of this vast territory spoke one common language, which they had never done before the British came, and would not have done but for British rule. This one fact alone kept, and is still keeping, the people of India united as a nation. The fact that the educated classes throughout the country spoke one common language, and that of a great and modern Power, also stimulated a great deal of self-criticism of traditional evils and prejudices (like the caste system and untouchability), and gave a strong impulse to demands for reforming and modernizing Indian society and attitudes.

However, the British imposition of English as the medium of education throughout the country has had certain unhappy and far-reaching psychological consequences. It created an urban élite in all walks of life which, by its knowledge and use of English, was cut off socially and intellectually from the millions of rural Indians. It involved a tremendous wastage of national effort in mastering a difficult foreign language. In the vast majority of cases, the English-educated came either to ignore or to denigrate traditional Indian cultural values and the Indian cultural heritage, and to attach undue importance to British (or western) values, and this further deepened the chasm between them and the vast majority of Indians. This is part of the reason for the recent anti-English agitation in India.

At the same time, British rule made a lasting impact on the development of Indian languages and literatures. Many British officials made important contributions to this development, especially in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, when the wealth of Indian languages and literatures was not widely known even in India, much less abroad. Most of the great Indian writers in Indian languages were stimulated by their knowledge of English and western literature, and one result of this was that Indian-language literatures, which were traditionally of a religious character, became secular. Some Indian writings were in imitation of, or translations from, western literature, but a great deal of

original work was stimulated as well. Indian-language journalism also owes a debt to English-language journalism.

The Constitution of India which came into force in January 1950 stipulated that Hindi would take the place of English within 15 years as the official language of the Union Government, but this has not been possible. In December 1967, the Indian parliament provided for the continuance of the English language indefinitely as an associate official language. But from the current trends of opinion, it seems that the present status of English will not last for long. It will remain merely as the most important subsidiary foreign language of the educated classes. Already most of the states of the Indian Union have made their respective regional languages the official language.

When in 1949 India adopted a Constitution which enshrined the parliamentary system of government, the event fulfilled Macaulay's forecast that 'the proudest day in English history' would come when, having tasted the delights of English institutions, Indians would demand them for themselves. Until recently many people, as many Indians as British and other foreigners, used to think and say that the parliamentary system of government adopted on the Westminster model was a lasting monument to British rule. Since the results of the last general elections, held in February 1967, new political trends and tendencies have entered into the Indian body politic, and it is no longer so certain that either the parliamentary system as such or the kind of parliamentary system which we inherited would or should last – on the ground that it does not quite suit Indian conditions. Early in January 1968, no less a person than a secretary of the Congress Party in the Union Parliament moved a non-official resolution at the annual party conference at Hyderabad proposing the appointment of a committee to examine whether it would not be in the interest of the country to replace the present cabinet form of government by the presidential system. Even though the resolution was eventually withdrawn after discussion, because of the opposition of the party leaders expressed through the deputy Prime Minister, it is significant that the resolution was moved at all.

One great achievement of British rule was the introduction of common civil and criminal laws and a uniform legal system



throughout the length and breadth of the country. So far, this system has been maintained, but a new factor seems to threaten its continuity and uniformity – the introduction of fourteen Indian languages as the media of business in the higher courts in different linguistic states. There is a deep anxiety in judicial and legal circles that this will undermine the judicial and legal unity of India, with grave consequences for the future. Whether this in itself will eventually also subvert the nature of the laws and legal institutions inherited from British rule is more than one can say at present.

The Indian educational system is another British legacy. A major change in the system, already introduced in most parts of the country, is that the respective regional Indian languages have been substituted for English as the medium of instruction up to the graduate level. In some universities, Indian languages have already been introduced even at the post-graduate level, and there is a demand for this change in other universities. It seems likely that in the very near future English will cease to be the medium of instruction at all levels of the Indian educational system, and that it will be replaced by Hindi or other regional languages.

The system of Indian administration introduced by the British rulers is another important legacy which is for the most part still in existence. There have been additions and modifications of course – like *Panchayati raj*, the Central and State Vigilance Commissioners (the Indian Ombudsmen) and the Planning Commission. But they have not changed the foundations or the general pattern of administration. However, there is now an Administrative Reforms Commission making a thorough investigation into the whole system, and it has already proposed many changes and innovations. These include some radical reforms to meet the old and still persistent criticism that the British administrative system was of the colonial type and, while good enough for maintaining law and order, was not suitable for promoting public welfare in a country undergoing a 'revolution of rising expectations'. Many more radical changes will no doubt be suggested.

Inevitably, the British introduced into the Indian way of life, outlook, thinking and tastes a preference for British/Western things and mores. Long before independence, and especially since the 1920s when Gandhi took over the reins of the nationalist

movement, there was a movement of revolt against this tendency and a demand for things Indian – ‘swadeshi’ (of one’s own country). This movement affected all aspects of Indian life – dress, food, the style of eating, style of living, speech and manners – even the form of greeting. At the height of the nationalist movement it was considered both patriotic and progressive to do things in the Indian style. The ardour with which this campaign was conducted cooled down slightly after independence, but since the last general elections (which brought into the legislatures individuals who are more representative of the rural masses), the old nationalist passion appears to have revived, and it seems likely that in the near future the foreign visitor to India will find the Indian way of life less and less western in style and increasingly Indian. Malcolm Muggeridge’s old sally about the Indian being the last Englishman left in the world, will perhaps cease to have much meaning in the foreseeable future. Of course, such features as are not peculiarly British (e.g. western dress) are bound to remain part of the Indian way of life.

British rule also brought with it western science and the scientific spirit, and a tremendous number of things associated with a modern state – railways, posts and telegraphs, automobiles, large mills and factories manufacturing on a mass scale a wide variety of goods, extensive use of machinery and mechanical aids in all walks of life, aviation, broadcasting, an army trained, modelled, and equipped on the British pattern, an impartial civil service. All this apparatus and paraphernalia of a modern state are valuable assets which independent India inherited and maintained, and on the foundations of which it has continued to build more and more modern and sophisticated superstructures.

So much for the more significant aspects of the British impact on India’s internal affairs. What about external affairs ?

The isolation of India from its immediate neighbours (particularly Russia and China) imposed by British rule has been almost entirely discarded by independent India or by the neighbours themselves. Independent India has resumed her Asian identity. One might indeed explain India’s active (according to some, over-active) role in world affairs in the immediate post-war years as a reaction to its earlier forced isolation.

For many years after independence, India was *the* leading

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spokesman of the world against colonialism and racialism, because she had herself been the victim of both. More recently, many other nations have joined the anti-colonial and anti-racial crusade, but India remains an important spokesman.

That the Indian economy under British rule was underdeveloped or lopsided in its development, was one of the bases of nationalist criticism, and since independence India has been one of the prominent advocates in world forums of international assistance for the development of the less developed countries of Asia and Africa, practically all of whose economies are stunted and stagnant as a result of long periods of alien rule.

Under British rule, a large number of Indian labourers were encouraged and/or assisted by the British Indian Government to migrate to other British colonies and to work there in agriculture and mining or on the railways, and many Indian traders and others followed in their wake. The British self-governing and other colonies to which the majority of them went included Ceylon, Burma, South Africa, parts of East and Central Africa, Mauritius, Malaya and Singapore, Fiji, British Guiana, and Trinidad. Many other smaller colonies like Gibraltar and Hong-kong also have a sprinkling of people of Indian origin, and there is a large number of Indians in the United Kingdom itself. The existence of these peoples faced independent India with many problems, some of which are still to be solved. The most important is racial discrimination. One of the first major actions of the interim government which Nehru and other Indian leaders set up in September 1946 (i.e., almost a year before actual independence) was to take to the United Nations General Assembly the question of racial discrimination, practised against people of Indian origin by the Government of the Union of South Africa. Second came the question of citizenship rights for people of Indian origin, who were either not given these rights or were treated as second-class citizens. The problem was not solved by the Indian Government advising these people to become citizens of the country of residence or to opt for Indian citizenship. It was partly to give these people time to make up their minds that India decided to stay in the Commonwealth (otherwise these people would have become aliens outright) and to agree to a Commonwealth citizenship. The presence of these people of Indian origin in other countries has also affected India's foreign relations with many former British

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colonies which have since become independent. For instance, ludicrous as it may seem, India has been accused of imperialist designs in East Africa. India has maintained cultural relations with certain countries (Mauritius, Fiji, Guyana) largely because of the presence there of people of Indian origin. Relations with others (e.g. Ceylon) have been strained by the problems arising from the presence of people of Indian origin in those countries.

India's continued membership of the Commonwealth is, of course, one of the long-term consequences of British rule. Not many Indians and few British leaders had expected before the transfer of power that independent India would choose to stay in the Commonwealth which, until she herself joined, was composed of the 'white Dominions'. But the goodwill generated by the manner of the British withdrawal was great enough for even men like Nehru, who had previously opposed any kind of association with Britain and the Commonwealth, to be converted, on the eve of independence, to the view that continued association was good for India and even for the rest of the world. Even so, it was assumed that the 1947 decision was a transitional measure which would be revoked when India's new republican Constitution came into force. This was not to be. India's goodwill towards her former imperial master and even towards the Dominions (which reciprocated the Indian attitude) was more enduring, and was one of the reasons why India continued its membership even after becoming a republic on 26 January 1950. In defence of this decision, Nehru maintained that since it was India's policy to build bridges between nations, it was not right to destroy the bridges with Commonwealth countries forged by history. This Commonwealth membership has in turn a many-sided impact on India's foreign policy and relations, both for good and ill.

It should be added, however, that since the death of Nehru there have been very few staunch supporters in India of India's continued Commonwealth membership. It would not be too much of an exaggeration to say that today India continues to be a member more out of lethargy and habit than out of any widespread conviction. Recent events within India and in Indo-British relations have created considerable uncertainty about the future of India's membership of the Commonwealth.

Just as the partition of pre-independent India and the creation of Pakistan were a major and tragic outcome of British rule, so one

might say that the bad state of Indo-Pakistani relations is one of its long-term consequences which India will have to live with for a long time, if not for ever. The position has not been improved by what many Indians, official and unofficial, think of as Britain's partisanship for Pakistan *vis-à-vis* India. This has naturally imposed tremendous stresses and strains on Indo-British relations which reached their lowest ebb in September 1965 during the Indo-Pakistani conflict. Pakistan is clearly going to be a permanent factor in Indo-British relations.

Even though British rule in India covered only a relatively short period in India's long and chequered history, many of the changes and developments resulting from that rule, directly or indirectly, seem to be too radical to meet the fate of the changes and developments introduced by India's previous alien rulers, except possibly by the 400 years of Muslim rule (which, however, acquired an indigenous character in its later years). Many may indeed be permanent. Unless and until there are any sudden convulsions in India, they will remain part of Indian life. Particularly in the realm of ideas and beliefs (faith in the democratic form of government, individual liberty and equality, the rule of law, the independence of the judiciary), it seems that British rule will have a lasting impact on India and the Indian people for as far ahead as one can legitimately predict. Moreover, in addition to its impact on India, British rule and its termination have had tremendous repercussions in many parts of the world, notably in Asia and Africa. Perhaps the most important of these is the liquidation of other colonial empires – American, Dutch, French, and Belgian (and of course the end of French and Portuguese rule over some tiny areas of India) and the consequent birth of many new states. British rule, and the end of British rule, was thus of great significance in world history, comparable to that of the Roman Empire.

At the end, in August 1947, India and Britain parted on terms of great goodwill and friendship – thanks to statesmanship in London and the wisdom and maturity of the Indian leaders. This manner of parting between a great imperial power and a great nationalist movement ensured for the first decade after Indian independence fairly good relations between the two countries, which in turn provided a congenial atmosphere and friendly public opinion in India for the maintenance of much of the

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British legacy. But since those first ten years, Indo-British relations have been subjected to great strains. In recent years, especially since the Indo-Pakistani conflict in September 1965, in which British intervention deeply angered Indian opinion, the old reservoir of goodwill has almost entirely evaporated. Judging by present trends in Indian opinion and attitudes, the prospects for Indo-British relations do not seem hopeful, and there is no longer a Jawaharlal Nehru to stem the tide of anti-British feelings. This change will inevitably have an adverse effect on the continuity of the legacy of British rule – at least that part which is peculiarly British, as in the realm of ideas and institutions. But other parts of the legacy which are not peculiarly British, but form part of the general movement of modernization – scientific and industrial progress, modern means of communication, and such aspects of personal life as dress and style of living – will of course endure; they have now become an integral part of the Indian way of life.