# Impact of British on Indian Society and Culture

The Britishers were instrumental in introducing Western culture, education and scientific techniques. Through those means, they gave traditional Indian life a jolt and galvanized the life and culture of its people.

Undoubtedly, the Seventeenth Century marked the zenith of Indian medieval glory. It gave way to the Eighteenth century which was a spectacle of corruption, misery and chaos leading to political helplessness. Right from 1498 when Vasco da Gamma set his foot on Indian soil, the European powers entered into Indian scene one after another.

The Portuguese power had no comparison to French and English. Ultimately in the conflict between the French and English, the latter became successful and planted the victorious banner of England in India in 1757 with the victory of Robert Clive.

#### Why British Influence was Lasting?

Western influence became effective in India mainly through the British who were the pioneers of a new technological and industrial civilization. They represented a new historic force which was later to charge the world and thus were the torchbearers of a revolutionary change.

India accepted the suzerainty of the British authority coming under its iron grip. Intellectually indifferent, spiritually subdued and psychologically weak at that time, India had to adopt with the British authorities. That is why the British impact was abiding and lasting on the Indian people.

**Education:**

The lasting impact of the West on Indian culture was the introduction of English system of education in this country. In the Eighteenth century, India was intellectually stagnant. She was untouched by the new scientific development of the west.

The historic decision taken by Lord Macaulay in 1835 was a turning point in India history which opened the flood-gates of European thought and literature for Indian intellectuals. This broke the intellectual isolation of the Indian mind and brought it into contact with Western science, literature, philosophy, history and so on. The ‘Downward Filtration Theory’ of Macaulay, ‘Woods Despatch’ in 1854 and ‘Hunter Commission’ in 1882 expanded the intellectual horizons of Indians. It eradicated the spell of mythical geography, legendary history and pseudo science from the Indian mind and acquainted them with new scientific knowledge of the west. This was really a lasting impact of the west of Indian culture.

#### Modern Transport and Communication System:

Rapid industrialization brought modem system of transport and communication. During Lord Dalhousie’s period, the first railway line was built and the train ran between Bombay and Thane in 1853. Then the Calcutta-Raniganj railway line was built and later on the Madras-Arcot railway. Similarly, right from the time of Lord William Bentinck, the highway building activities were carried on. In 1839, the Grand Trunk Road was built, that connected Delhi and Calcutta Later on it was connected with Lahore and Peshawar.

Lord Dalhousie also galvanized the activity of Postal Department by introducing Penny Postage System in India. Further, he was instrumental in bringing the telegraph system in India All these modem systems of transport and communication, all in a sudden, took India to a modem world. The impact of this modernisation was largely felt on every walk of Indian life. This acted as a boomerang for the British authorities in India

#### Economic Sphere:

In the economic sphere, the British people were regarded as exploiters from the very beginning. Before the British colonialism, India had a flourishing export trade in silk, cotton, salt, sugar etc. However, the British rule ruined the basic economic structure of India. Indian rural economy was transformed to suit the new modes of industrial Britain.

This altogether changed the community structure and Indian way of life. In industrial sphere, Indian manufacturing skill, in spinning, weaving, ivory, gold and silver works, filigree and luxury goods suffered a set back because of British industrial policy. Indian traditional agriculture was converted to cultivation of cash crops like indigo and tobacco which left stigmas of poverty on Indian peasants.

Besides, the raw materials from India was exported to England what Dada Bhai Naoroji rightly called as The Drain of Wealth’. This made India poorer. The other side of the coin is also to be taken into consideration. The inflow of Western capital, development of a modem banking and communication system, the establishment of textile, jute, sugar, cement, glass and other factories led to rapid industrialization in India which brought modem industries into existence.

The growth of modem industry and commerce brought urbanization. Further, the artistic skill of Indians for elegance, balance and beauty increased and it brought refinement in their attitude and taste. The demand of Indian coffee and tea in European countries led to plantation and that legacy India still continues which enables her to meet a great part of her economy.

#### Social Sphere:

In the social sphere British impact proved to be beneficial. The prohibition of Sati, abolition of child-marriage, introduction of widow remarriage, checking of infanticide, polygamy, untouchabihty etc. eradicated age old social evils from the Indian society.

Further, the undermining of caste and sex distinctions were certain other commendable measures of the British which encouraged the Indians to incorporate all these ideas while framing their constitution. Thus, many social evils had come to their logical end long before India became independent. Thus, catholicity was introduced to Indian society by the British authorities.

#### Reorganization of Indian Civil Service:

The Indian Civil Service was carefully built up during the British rule into a powerful and efficient bureaucratic force. In the last decade of Eighteenth Century, Cornwallis set himself to purity and reorganized the administration and filled all the key posts with men from Britain.

With the gradual march of time, other more specialized services were established and the Public Works Department, Indian Police Service, Indian Forest Service, Indian Medical Service followed each other in succession. Thus, the British authorities undertook the process of converting India into a modem state. The present Indian administrative system is a legacy of the British rule.

#### ****Constitutional Development:****

In the sphere of constitution, the idea of human equality, human rights and liberty were the gifts of British influence. It leased a nation coughed, chocked and groaned under the British hegemony which got soothing balm in the form of liberty in speech, action, religion and so on and so forth. Even the Indians could criticize the activities of the British government. The Government Acts of 1919 and 1935 were pointers in these directions.

#### Rule of Law:

The political instability of India was put an end to by the establishment of an orderly and centralized government by the British. It demolished the traditional personal rule and later brought about the development of ‘Rule of Law’. The multiplicity of governmental functions gave rise to an organised bureaucracy which eclipsed the self-governing village Panchayats.

The new concept of India introduced by the British authorities was ‘Equality before Law’. This idea was definitely in variance with the Hindu thought The insistence of British courts on dealing equally with a Brahmin and an outcaste was at first resented by the Indians and accepted in the long run. A Brahmin, a Muslim, a Christian and a member of any sect – all became equal before the law. A hierarchy of judicial officers was created to impart justice to one and all.

#### Prompting Religious and Reformation Movement:

Indian response to Western impact was a first noticed in the field of religion. Of course, Christianity was not a new thing in India before the arrival of the British. During rule of East India Company, the Christian missionary activities in India became wide-spread.

As complicacies in Vedic religion gave way to the rise of heterodox religion and the impact of Islam had given encouragement to the Bhakti Movement in medieval times, the advent of Western civilization caused the growth of reform movement in modem times.

The first torch-bearer of Indian cultural renaissance was Raja Rammohan Roy. With the foundation of ‘Brahmo Samaj’, in 1828 began a new chapter in the Indian reformation movement. It was the synthesis of some of the main elements in Hinduism and Christianity. To synthesize the culture of East and West, it encouraged rationalism and social reforms.

Besides a religious reformer, Rammohan was known to all as an ardent social reformer, staunch patriot, pioneer of modem education and above all the father of modem Indian renaissance. He was followed by Keshab Chandra Sen who established ‘Pratthana Samaj’.

In the middle of the Nineteenth century, a reaction set in and thoughtful men began to wonder if they stayed too far from the traditions of their ancestors. Swami Dayanand Saraswati, the chief apostle of this new school of thought, founded ‘Arya Samaj’ and gave a clarion call to all – “Go back to the Vedas”.

He advised people not to be influenced by religions like Islam and Christianity but to return to the pure teachings of the Vedas where lies the essence of Indian culture. The religious reaction against surrender to Western and Christian influence was to go still further. Rama Krishna Pramahansa and his great disciple Swami Vivekananda preached the purest form of Hinduism.

Vivekananda was a novel blend of East and West and his words – “Arise, awake and stop not till the goal is reached” definitely instilled nationalism into the nerves of the people. Aurobindo, Vidyasagar, M.G. Ranade etc. were other social reformers. In this way the Western influence was largely felt so far as the religious and social reformation movements were concerned.