

INDIAN HISTORY- 19th Century

Stuart Blackburn, Ph.D.

Overview

The nineteenth century was the colonial century in Indian history. And it was a century of war. It began with Britain having gained ascendancy over their Mughal, Mahratta and European rivals and ended with the high-water mark of imperial power. At the century's mid-point, in 1857-58, British rule was convulsed by a revolt sparked by mutiny among Muslim soldiers in the British army. The revolt was crushed, but a lot of blood was spilt, leading to the formal deposition of the Mughal emperor (then a mere puppet on his hollow throne in Delhi) and the transfer of the rule of India from the East India Company to the British Crown. Queen Victoria became 'Empress of India', and India was the 'jewel in the crown of Empire.' However, the very institutions and ideas that the British embedded in Indian society in order to stamp their civilizational imprint on a 'heathen' nation generated the nationalism that would expel the foreigners in the next century. Provincial legislatures debated equal rights, courts considered justice, universities taught history and newspapers created a sense of the nation. This new public sphere encouraged debate and disseminated ideas that led to social reforms and a re-evaluation of Hindu and Muslim traditions. Indians also borrowed and adapted Western models, such as the novel and modern drama. While Indian and British investment edged India toward industrialisation, the economy remained agrarian, rural poverty was widespread and famine struck more than once.

Events

Vellore The revolt of 1857-58 was not the only mutiny in the British Indian army. It was preceded and, to some extent, foreshadowed by a smaller but still violent event in the South Indian town of Vellore in 1809. At the end of a day of fighting at Vellore Fort, about 200 British soldiers had been killed or wounded, and about 100 Indian soldiers executed for treason. The overt cause was resentment at the new regulations regarding dress and appearance. Hindus were prohibited from wearing caste marks, Muslims were forced to shave facial hair and both groups took offence at the leather part of their headgear. A deeper cause of the rebellion was resentment caused by British expansion. After the British defeated Tipu Sultan (the Muslim ruler of Mysore) in 1799, they confined him, his son and their families in Vellore Fort. The plotters planned to free him and reinstate him on the throne of the Mysore kingdom. When the plot failed, it marked the end of organised resistance to British rule in South India.

Mahratta wars Western India, however, was still controlled by the powerful Mahrattas, who had defeated the Mughals and stymied British expansion. They had fought wars with the British in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, ceding territory to them but remaining undefeated. But a final war in 1817-1818, they were crushed and their territory (with one small exception) came under direct British rule.

Burmese wars Having taken administrative control of Bengal in the east in the mid-18th century, the British pushed northeast, toward the emerging market of China, on the other side of the Himalayas. This meant confronting the Burmese kings who controlled modern-day Assam. In the process, the British and the Burmese fought three wars, at the end of which the British had annexed not only the northeast corner of the subcontinent, but also modern-day Burma.

Sikh wars At the other corner of the empire, in the far northwest, the British fought two more wars, this time against the Sikhs in the 1840s. A Sikh kingdom began to form in the eighteenth century, when the Mughal Empire disintegrated, and by the early nineteenth century, they were a formidable force. However, they were defeated when they sought to extend their rule into British-held territory. And they were defeated a second time when they joined a revolt against the British by the governor of Multan. In the end, the Punjab and most of modern-day Pakistan were annexed and came under direct British rule.

Afghan wars Further to the northwest, in modern-day Afghanistan, the British became involved in the 'Great Game.' Aware that the Russians were pushing down from the north and keen to protect their borders, the British sought to gain influence in Afghanistan. Their attempts resulted in two less-than successful wars (1839-1842, 1878-1879). Although the British suffered a humiliating retreat from Kabul in 1842, they achieved their political objective of a neutral Afghanistan

Revolt/Mutiny In 1857/58 Indian soldiers in the British Bengal army mutinied and others joined the revolt against colonial rulers. As with the earlier revolt at Vellore, the immediate problem lay with military equipment. Soldiers believed that new cartridges (which they had to bite off) were greased with pig-fat, which was abhorrent to orthodox Muslims and many Hindus. There was also resentment because military ranks did not always match caste hierarchy and because the government appeared to support Christianity within the army. The revolt began in Meerut, but spread to several garrison cities, including Delhi which the rebels held for several months. The revolt was crushed (with the help of Indian soldiers in other regiments), but approximately 1,000 British had been killed and perhaps as many as 20,000 Indians. The slaughter shook the foundations of British colonialism and led to a series of reforms. The uprising, which caught the British by surprise, persuaded London to abolish the East India Company and place India under the British Crown. Indians were also now subject to new penal, criminal and civil codes. Government bureaucracy expanded, and colonialism began to touch life in towns and villages.

Ilbert Bill In 1883, proposed legislation called the Ilbert Bill sought to amend existing legislation that had exempted Europeans from the jurisdiction of Indian judges. This proposal sparked furious opposition from the British, mainly from planters who feared that Indian judges would not, as British judges had, take a lenient view of their treatment of workers. The British response prompted an Indian backlash that gave impetus to growing anti-colonial sentiment and convinced some that colonialism meant racial discrimination.

Indian National Congress In 1885, the Indian National Congress was formed by a small group of educated elites who were loyal to British rule and merely wanted political reforms within the Empire. Its founders included a British civil servant in India, a Hindu industrialist who served as MP in Parliament in London and a Parsi cotton merchant. During its early years, the Indian National Congress made few headlines, passing only tepid resolutions, but it did provide a national forum for political debate, and events soon catapulted it into a fierce struggle to liberate India from foreign rule.

Dadabhai Naoroji One founder of the Indian National Congress was Dadabhai Naoroji (1825-1917). A Parsi businessman, Naoroji spent fifty years living in England, during which time he served in Parliament as the first Indian MP, wrote essays and summited petitions, all with one purpose: to persuade the British government and people that Indians should be granted the same rights as other British subjects. A good example of his argumentative prose is found in *Admission of educated natives into the Indian Civil Service* (London, 1868).

Ramohun Roy Ramohun Roy (1774-1833) was perhaps the most influential thinker of the early 19th century. A Bengali Brahman, and founder of the Brahmo Samaj movement, he wrote crusading essays in Persian, Sanskrit, Bengali and English. In 1803 he published an essay in Persian, *Tuhfat-ul-Muwahhidin*, arguing the truth of monotheism. From 1823, he edited a Bengali-language newspaper (*Sambad Kaumudi*). In 1829, he published a Sanskrit tract condemning idolatry. In 1823, when the British government passed regulations restricting the press in India, he used his fluent English to write a 'letter' to King George IV in protest.

Swami Vivekananda Roy's intellectual influence carried straight through the century, touching almost every major figure and culminating in Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902), another Bengali Brahman. Times change, however, and if Roy was an enlightenment thinker, Vivekananda was a reforming saint. He was inspired by Sri Ramakrishna and took his vows as a sadhu (wandering monk), but became the spokesperson for international Hinduism after a speech at a conference of world religions in Chicago in 1893. Through speaking tours and published essays, he explained Indian independence as a recovery of its spiritual essence. He advocated abolition of the caste system, worked in famine relief efforts and yet supported industrialisation.

Government

Administration British India was divided into provinces (earlier known as presidencies) and independent (or princely) states. Provinces, such as Bengal, Madras, Bombay, Northwest and Central, covered about 60% of India and were under direct British Rule. The princely states, which numbered in the hundreds, were under indirect rule, which meant that the Indian ruler remained on his throne, with his retinue and symbols of power, and retained control over internal affairs. The external affairs of the princely states were in the hands of the British government in Calcutta. And in practice, even domestic matters were subject to (often substantial) British influence in the figure of the British Resident. The provinces were run by a Governor (Lt. Governor or Chief Commissioner) advised by a council. Within each province, a district was governed by a Collector (or Commissioner), who usually held executive, legislative and judicial powers. Each province was then sub-divided into *taluks* (a unit borrowed from the Mughals) for purposes of revenue collection.

Reforms Major reforms followed in the wake of the revolt in 1857-58. The British Crown in London became a third tier of government, with a Secretary of State for India and a council of advisors. In Calcutta, the Governor-General (later Viceroy) was now answerable to the Secretary of State, although he and his executive council still held primary responsibility for legislation. In the 1860s, the council became a cabinet and was enlarged to include 12 members serving two-year terms. Half of these members were British officers who oversaw a department, such as revenue, military and finance. The other members of the executive council were British nationals living in India and Indians. In the provinces, legislative powers (which had been taken away in the 1830s) were restored. And in the 1890s, rules for provincial legislatures were changed to include Indian representation.

Indian Civil Service (ICS) After 1857-58, the administrative officers in India came from the ICS, a newly-created branch of the civil service in Britain. The ICS recruited and trained officers, who were then sent to govern British India. Some were engineers, some were doctors and some were judges, but the most important were the political officers. For their first posting they were sent to a district as an assistant to the Collector and then spent their whole lives in India, climbing up an administrative hierarchy with many rungs. At first, this elite cadre was recruited almost entirely from an 'old-boy' network among the upper-class in Britain. After examinations were introduced in the 1870s, the social base widened. In the 1880s were Indians permitted to join this club and assist in the governance of their own country.

Military The English East India Company recruited armies to protect its trading stations along the coasts and later its revenue collection inland. Each of the three presidencies (Bengal, Madras and Bombay) had its own army and its own Commander-in-Chief. All three armies contained British units, with British soldiers and officers, and Indian units, with British officers and Indian soldiers recruited from the so-called 'martial races' (for example, the Sikhs and Gurkhas). After 1857-58, the three separate armies retained their independent status and their own command structure, although they were increasingly under the command of the Commander-in-Chief in Calcutta, who was now a member of the Governor-General's Executive Council. 1895, the three separate armies were amalgamated into the British Indian Army.

Collaboration Although British rule rested on economic power and military strength, British India was built on local collaboration. Rajas ceded sovereignty in return for a pension; landed groups turned over tax revenues while the District Collector protected their rights; peasants and marginalised groups became soldiers in the British army; merchants and traders sold goods to foreign entrepreneurs. Without local cooperation, the British Raj would not have been possible. Consider the fact that by the end of the century, a country of about 230 million people was governed by about 1,000 officers (95% of whom were British). It was not uncommon for a rural district the size of three English counties to be run by a 25-year-old British officer, a younger fellow countryman and three Indian clerks.

Economy

East India Company From the beginning of its rule in Bengal in the mid-18th century until its abolition in the mid-19th century, the economic policies of the East India Company were a continuation of its rivals in India. The 'Company' (as it was known) furthered the mercantilist and proto-capitalist

institutions and practices of the Mughals and Mahrattas. However, with its increasing penetration of the countryside, it enjoyed an even greater degree of control and command of resources. Even more important, as an international trading power, the Company itself had resources and expertise beyond those of its predecessors.

Deindustrialisation One of the major effects of British colonialism on the Indian economy was a steady decline in its industrial base. Up until the 1840s, India produced a range of high-quality goods, from textiles to metal-ware. Backed up with modern technology, these and other sectors were exporting goods to Europe via Britain. By the turn of the century, however, the balance of trade shifted from India exporting finished goods to supplying raw materials, mainly raw cotton and jute, to be finished by the steam-driven mills in the north of England. The production of artillery and other tools of war, which had been produced in India, was similarly lost to British-based manufacturers. Indian investors opened up coal mines and iron fields, but these minerals were sent to Britain for processing. In effect, India became a 'colony' supplying the imperial power with raw materials, which were then sold back at high prices.

Agriculture Although India was on the road to industrialisation, the economy remained fundamentally agrarian. The domestic and foreign demand for rice, indigo, cotton and sugar raised prices in the first half of the century, and yields were boosted by a substantial increase in the acreage under irrigation. However, price fluctuations on the world market and avaricious money lenders badly affected Indian farmers, prompting peasant riots in many regions. Famines were common. Moreover, in South India, the British introduced a new system of tax collection known as *ryotwari*. In contrast to the old *zamindari* system (in which an official collected tax from a number of villages or landowners), in this new system, thousands of small cultivators (*ryots*) were issued with a title to the land and expected to remit tax on their own. The idea was to create a modern peasantry, modelled on the free yeoman of England, without middlemen and moneylenders. In practice, it led to the impoverishment of many cultivators. First, the tax was not levied on actual crops but on an estimate of the potential yield. Second, it had to be paid in cash. But estimates were often too high, due to unpredictable weather, and the need for ready-cash threw the peasants back into the hands of the money-lenders. As an illustration of the capricious nature of global markets, the demand for Indian cotton shot up suddenly in the 1860s during the American Civil War. When the north blockaded the south's ports and prevented the south's raw cotton from reaching England, the gap was filled by expanding cotton production in South India. Suddenly, by the 1870s, farmers from low-status castes had become middle-class in terms of income.

Railways The modernising economy of 19th-century India relied heavily on an extensive rail network, which by the end of the century was the fourth largest in the world. Intending the railways to facilitate troop movements (in the wake of the 1857-59 revolt) and to stimulate the economy, the government in London invested heavily in this project, although the railways were at first owned by private individuals. Several lines were up and running by the 1860s, and by 1900 the total network covered more than 18,000 miles. By then, Indian industrialists and princely states had also invested in rail lines, although on terms less favourable than to British investors. Although Indians gained employment on this massive infrastructure, they benefitted little overall. The locomotives and rolling stock were manufactured in England, and Indians rarely held senior posts in the railway system. In 1900, the railways were nationalised and run by the British government in India.

Society

Colonial penetration Indian society had adjusted to political change before, but most of those changes had been administrative (who is in charge) and fiscal (how is tax collected). British colonialism, however, penetrated to very fabric of local society, disrupting relations between patron and client groups. The increasing power of the District Collector and the courts, for example, meant a different kind of authority and new rules. Whereas previously local struggles were won on the basis of prerogatives and obligations, now they were decided according to the somewhat fuzzy notion of the 'rule of law.'

Social change During the 19th century, some of the old rural elites, both Hindu and Muslim, were side-lined by a modern and foreign cadre of administrators. At the same time, a growing professional class of English-educated Indian doctors, engineers, lawyers, bankers, industrialists and scientists

claimed more social authority in the towns and cities. Among this new elite, caste barriers eased and mobility increased. A similar phenomenon occurred at the bottom of the social hierarchy, among Untouchables and others who converted to Christianity in large numbers, especially in South India. This, in turn, prompted some Hindus to form associations in order to promote their religion. The volatile interface between Christian converts and their Hindu neighbours is illustrated by a controversy in the first half of the century in South India. When low-caste women, recently converted to Christianity, attempted to wear a breast-cloth or a jacket in imitation of higher-caste women, they met with violence and Christian schools were burned. Eventually, in 1859, the government of Travancore ruled in favour of the low-caste women's right to dress as they chose. Christianity had become a vehicle for social mobility, just as Buddhism had in the classical age and would do so again in the 20th century.

Relation between Indians and the State In the 1830s, social relations between Indians and their British rulers underwent a fundamental shift. Until that decade, the policy of the East India Company had been *laissez-faire*. Although the British fiercely protected their commercial interests, often by military means, they did not interfere with 'native' institutions or social conventions. Indeed, the relaxed attitude toward social interaction led to many British men assimilating into local life and living as 'white Mughals.' By the 1830s, however, British rule became part of 'civilising' project, with the ambition to educate and reform Indians. This shift to interventionism was signalled by lifting restrictions on missionary work in 1813, by abolishing *sati* (widow self-immolation) in 1829 and by replacing Persian with English as the official language of British India in 1832. The new colonial mission was also advanced by the English Education Act of 1835, which abandoned previous support for traditional Indian education and languages in favour of a British education through the English language.

Public Sphere Another piece of legislation in the same year, the Press Act of 1835, contributed to the emergence of a new social space in British India. The 'public sphere' refers to communication and debate among citizens outside official governmental forums, especially through the medium of newspapers, journals and books. The largely English-language press had been tightly controlled (to prevent sedition) until the new thinking of the 1830s lifted restrictions and allowed anyone, including Indians, to publish. This opportunity was seized with both hands. Soon Indian publishers were printing books in Tamil, Hindi, Urdu and Bengali, as well as in English. Indian-owned newspapers began somewhat later, but by 1900 there were over 100 dailies or weeklies in print, mostly in Indian languages. British-owned English-language newspapers and publishing houses also contributed to public discourse since after mid-century, the universities of Calcutta, Bombay and Madras produced an English-educated elite who demanded a greater say in social and political affairs. Along with intellectuals in regional languages, they set up civic associations and libraries, published journals and newspapers, and wrote essays and novels that advocated reform.

Culture

Bengal Renaissance From the early 19th century, Bengalis were exposed to colonial institutions, such as the Asiatic Society, the College at Fort William and Christianity, which led to a reassessment of Hindu tradition known as the Bengal Renaissance. Based in Calcutta, it began with the reformer Ramohun Roy (1772-1833) and ended with writer Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941). It was a broad-based movement, encompassing radical social practices (dowry-free marriages), religious reform organisations (the Brahma Samaj), scientific discoveries (radiology) and literary experimentation (modern novels). The Bengal Renaissance exemplifies the peculiar dynamic of nineteenth-century India: confronted by colonial modernity, India responded by reshaping pre-existing beliefs and practices into something called 'tradition.'

Literature Urdu writers in the first half of the century continued writing in Indo-Persian genres (*qissa/dastan*, *masnavi*, *ghazal*). The decline of Muslim power meant a loss of prestige for Urdu (and Persian), which became the literature of lament. The greatest Urdu poet (and arguably the greatest Indian poet) of the century was Ghalib (1797-1869), who was an aristocrat and a defender of the crumbling Muslim aristocracy. But it was the novel that most expressed the historical shifts in the second half of the century. By 1900, most regional languages had produced a modern novel, but, predictably, those by Bengalis in Calcutta are the most memorable. These writers include

Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941), who later won the Nobel Prize, and Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay (1838–1894), who captured the spirit of the age with one novel that a song ('Bande Mataram, 'Hail to thee, Mother') that became the rallying cry for Indian independence. Mention should also be made of the first modern Tamil novel written by Rajam Aiyer (1872-1898) in the 1890s. *Kamalampal Carittiram* ('The Fatal Rumour' or 'The Story of Kamalampal', 1893-1895) is a classic story of social reform focusing on the life of a married woman.

Religion Hinduism was reformed both by urban and rural elites, who pulled it in different directions. The Brahmo Samaj, formed in 1828 by English-educated intellectuals in Calcutta, encouraged a monotheistic and rational Hinduism that opposed the worship of idols, child marriage, dowry, *sati* (widow self-immolation) and caste inequality. The opposite trend, to recover old practices, was spearheaded by the Arya Samaj movement in the Gangetic heartland. This reform movement was led by the firebrand Dayananda Saraswati (1824-1883), who promoted cow protection and denounced both Christianity and Islam. Muslim reform movements centred on two institutions, close to Delhi. The Aligarh movement, led by Syed Ahmed Khan (1817-1898) and based at the Anglo-Oriental College, believed that Islam and modernity were not incompatible. Khan argued that one could be a good Muslim and still have an English education and enlightenment ideas. An alternative approach, centred on the Deoband seminary, taught a version of pure Islam in confrontation with infidels, both Hindu and British. Christianity grew into a major cultural presence in India, especially through the Protestant missions that spread all over the country. They established schools, translated the bible into dozens of languages and eventually developed a distinctive literature, that Indianised Christian story material.

Reading

- Burton Stein, *A History of India* (Blackwell, 1998)
Andrew Porter, *The Oxford History of the British Empire, Vol.3, The Nineteenth Century* (Oxford, 1998)
Ainslie T. Embree, *Sources of Indian Tradition, Vol II* (Columbia, 1988)
Susan Bayly, *Caste, Society and Politics in India from the Eighteenth Century to the Modern Age* (Cambridge, 1999)
David Arnold, *Science, Technology and Medicine in Colonial India* (Cambridge, 2000)
C. A. Bayly, *Indian Society and the Making of the British Empire* (Cambridge, 1990)
Kenneth W. Jones, *Socio-Religious Reform Movements in British India* (Cambridge, 1990)

Discussion questions

1. The Revolt/Mutiny in 1857-58 shook the confidence of the colonial rulers and prompted a reconsideration of their policies and goals. Analyse the causes and consequences of this crucial event. Include careful descriptions of who actually did revolt, where and when. Similarly, pay attention to the reactions among different groups within the colonial state—military, government, public opinion in India and in the UK.
2. The Bengal Renaissance was one of the major cultural developments during the 19th century. In some respects it was a reaction to colonialism, while from another perspective its causes lay much deeper in the past. Write an essay, arguing for one position or the other. First describe the events of the 'renaissance', the key actors, texts and institutions. Then explain the causes of each in order to support your argument.
3. One of the less-well researched aspects of the 19th century is the rise of print. In his book *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson argues that nationalism in Europe and Asia was only possible when the population was united by the new medium of print—books, journals, newspapers—and the public sphere it created. In other words, print enabled people to

imagine a nation before it actually existed. Analyse the role of print in the rise of Indian nationalism.

4. Assess the factors that led to the success of British colonialism in the 19th century. Military victories played a part, as did economic collaboration with local merchants and elites, and alliances with rajas. Select three key events to illustrate these three factors and analyse the significance of each. Finally, compare your conclusion with the scholarly consensus of another brand of European colonialism (French, Dutch or Portuguese).
5. Colonialism in India was a complex set of economic, political and cultural encounters between Europeans and Indians. Both groups were heterogeneous, with different kinds of actors and populations, possessing diverse motivations and resources. Looking at the rise of British colonial rule, describe this multiplicity by analysing three or four key events.

Texts

1. Rammohun Roy (1774-1833) from *English Works*:

'The advocates of idolatry and their misguided followers, over whose opinions prejudice and obstinacy prevail more than good sense and judgment, prefer custom and fashion to the authorities of their scriptures, and therefore continue, under the form of religious devotion, to practise a system which destroys, to the utmost degree, the natural texture of society, and prescribes crimes of the most heinous nature, which even the most savage nations would blush to commit...'

2. Rammohun Roy (1774-1833), from *English Works*:

'I feel persuaded that by separating from the others matters contained in the New Testament, the moral precepts found in that book, these will be more likely to produce the desirable effect of improving the hearts and mind of men of different persuasions....This simple code of religion and morality is so admirably calculated to elevate men's ideas to high and liberal notions of one GOD, who has equally subjected all living creatures, without distinction of cast, rank or wealth, to change, disappointment, pain, and death...'

3. Syed Ahmad Khan (1817-1898), from *Advice to the People*:

'A man should think about those events which happen in the world and strive to instruct himself from such a study of their consequences. The turmoil of violence which happened was only a punishment for the ungratefulness on the Hindustanis [inhabitants of India]...In Hindustan, people are not at all accustomed to learn about former times from the facts of history, nor from reading books. It is for this reason that people are not acquainted with the injustices and oppression that used to take place in the days of past rulers. Whether rich or poor, a person in those times could never be at ease. If you had been acquainted with the injustices and excesses of those past days, you have appreciated the value of English rules and given thanks to God...'

4. B.G. Tilak (1856-1920), from *Writings and Speeches*:

'We have perceived one fact, that the whole of this administration, which is carried on by a handful of Englishmen, is carried on with our assistance. We are all in Subordinate service. This whole government is carried on with our assistance and they try to keep us in ignorance of our power...The point is to have the entire control in our hands. I want to have the key of my house...Self-government is our goal. We want a control over our administrative machinery. We don't want to become clerks and remain clerks...'