

HOW EMPIRE EMPOWERED INDIANS: LOOKING FROM LOW

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Abstract

This paper attempts to explore if empire has really empowered, in any form, any section among colonised contrary to the notion of disempowerment by empire. Undoubtedly, imperialism looted, exploited, discriminated and robbed the people of their economy, religion and cultural value system across world. But, contrarily it has proved a boon for colonised-of-colonised, to say, slaves-of-slaves. In India, majority of people were enslaved on axis of caste, class, gender, race and ethnicity. Among these, women and Dalits were in pathetic conditions as they were discriminated, exploited and subjugated by andocentric and caste society. Dalits were deprived of their merest human rights. They were treated not as human beings but as animals or worse than animals. Likewise, the conditions of women, in general, were inhuman whereas conditions of Dalits women are needless to mention. In the situations, how did the many-fold marginalized get empowered? In this backdrop, this paper raises the questions as to what were the factors that contributed to their empowerment. To what extent, did these sections get empowered? Who rejects and who accepts the colonial legacy after independence and why? Thus this paper seeks to answer these questions based on some historical facts and scrutiny of some literary narratives.

Keywords: Empire, Empower, low, Caste, Gender

INTRODUCTION

“We [colonialism] first crush people to the earth, and then claim the right of trampling on them forever, because they are prostrate.”

– Child

Lydia Maria Child rightly puts forward mechanics of the empire it practised to colonise for century. The imperialism, undoubtedly, has looted, plundered, ravaged and trampled the colonised brutally and even then it justifies it as necessarily humane act of civilization. But the reality of imperialism is inconspicuous. Regarding its difference of theory and praxis, Edward Said reveals sarcastically that every empire claims that “it is unlike all other empires, and that it has a mission certainly not to plunder and control but to educate and liberate the peoples and places it rules directly or indirectly.” But, imperialism has been inhuman practice that lasted long and ended in violence i.e. genocide, homicide and, tensions among the people and neighbouring nations forever consequent to the partitions.

Nevertheless, it is knavery to think everything was at its right place in these countries before Imperialism, particularly in India. At the time Britishers colonised India, she was suffering from severe caste system that did not allow the lower caste people to get education, own property, procure drinking water from pond/river, reside in caste Hindus localities, and freedom to choose profession etc. They were not treated as human beings. Their life had reduced to worse than animals. And the conditions of women, both of upper caste and of lower caste, were worse as they, lower caste women particularly, had to face patriarchal discrimination along with other discriminations i.e. caste and class. The inhuman systems like Sati¹ and devdasi²/murali³ were prevalent. Thus both these sections women and Dalits were slaves of

¹ The custom of widow burning on her husband's funeral pyre prevalent in upper caste Hindus of India.

slaves. Tulsidas verifies the marginalized status of them as he writes “*Dhol Ganwar Shudra Pashu Nari Sakal Taadana Ke Adhikari*” (Ramcharitmanas, 3) [drum, illiterate, low caste people, women and animals are subject to beatings or torture]. (qtd. in “Relevance of”)

Alike Tulsidas’s justification of caste colonisation, J.S. Mill, “one of the ultimate founders of the Leninist theory of imperialism”, (Rothbard 288) also vindicates English imperialism. In this regard, Sullivan argues that, for Mill, “England had a right to rule despotically because it brought the benefits of higher civilization.” (610) Thus the English warrants imperialism as their mission to civilize the world rather than colonisation out of sheer sense of superiority. It led to restructuring of Indian education system aiming to institute their cultural, linguistic and literary hegemony. Consequently, the English passed English Education Act, 1835 to fund only western subjects taught in English discontinuing Arabic and other oriental languages. (Mukerji) Later, Freedom of Press Act (1835) discontinues the publication of English texts into Arabic and Sanskrit. (Mukerji) To spread English, they engaged the educated class of India, Brahmins, which could bridge the gap between colonisers and colonised. Tharoor argues in *Inglorious Past* argues that “The English language was not a gift to Indians, he writes, but an instrument of colonialism that was primarily intended for the benefit of meeting the administrative needs of the British colonial masters.” (qtd. In Bhatia)

The need of effective governance and administration also forced Britishers to introduce the English education system besides the cultural hegemony. Therefore, Governor-General Lord Hardinge’s resolution dated 10 October 1844 stated that “for all government appointments preference would be given to the knowledge of English” Mukerji writes, that sped up the education of English in India. Ensuantly, schools were opened but the indigenous ruling class, Brahmins, who had joined British administration, army and services, opposed Britishers’ attempt to extend education to untouchables on the pretext of local system of hierarchy. Whereas the indigenous educational institutions such as Madarsa and Sanskrit colleges, supported by Britishers, in various Provinces of British India were essentially religious in nature.

Hunter Commission reports that the education for untouchable castes was scarce as they had no education system of their own and available education was inaccessible to them for being lower castes. The upper caste teachers, parents and students all were adamant not to admit untouchables in the schools upper caste teach and study in. The attitude of Brahmins towards education of untouchable is evident in Tilak’s opposition to the admission of Mahars and Mangs to the schools where upper caste children studied. (“Admission to Mahar” 5) Following the Commission’s Report and resistance of upper castes for education of untouchables, British government opened separate schools for depressed classes and had to ask missionary bodies to teach untouchables. To encourage missionaries to teach low caste students, English government relaxed some of the grant-in-aid rules related to their educational institutes. Thus, untouchables could have access to education. Nevertheless, the issue of women education was still absent. The caste Hindus had no vision to educate their girls and women while untouchables were not capable to think of. Later, Savitri Bai Phule, wife of Jyotiba Phule, opened schools for girls in 1848. The negative attitude of upper castes towards women education is imperative to mention as “groups of orthodox men followed the first female teacher of India [savitri Bai Phule] on her way to work. They threw rotten eggs, cow dung, tomatoes and stones. They abused her in obscene language.” (Chakrabarty)

² A devadasi was a woman who was dedicated to worship and serve a deity or a temple for the rest of her life. This led to their sexual exploitation. And later only untouchable girls were forced in this custom.

³ A murali was lower caste girl dedicated to god and who were sexually exploited. This system was prevalent in Mahar community of Maharashtra

It must not be mistaken that upper castes opposed the education of lower caste in English only in colonial period. But they opposed English education in post-colonial India too. The English not only had empowered Indians to unite and protest against colonial power and, make India free but had helped the lower caste equally in terms of caste questions, their colonization by caste Hindus. Ambedkar also emphasizing the relevance of education metaphorically says ""Education Is The Milk Of Tigris! Who Will Drink He Can't Stay Without Roaring." (qtd. in "In Solidarity") Undoubtedly, English educated person questions the oppressive system that is why the socialists i.e. Lohia were fanatically "anti-English, and launched an '*Angrezi Hatao*' [remove English] agitation in 1957." (Aiyar) The anti-English move is move towards caste hierarchy than the protest against colonial language. Similar to Lohia, in 1963 *Jan Sangh* "launched a violent agitation for abolishing English not only in official use but in shop signs, street signs and even car number plates." (Aiyar) It is pertinent to mention here that all these agitators, being from Hindi speaking belt, wanted Hindi as official language. Dominance of Hindi over any Indian or foreign language confirms the political and cultural superiority permanently. This becomes more necessary to mention here that "very English-educated Brahmins are now leading anti-English education movements across several states – including Goa, Telangana, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka and the Hindi heartland of North-Central India. And why is that? Because they do not want others to partake of the benefits of English education that they enjoy." (Shepherd "Brahmin Groups")

Pawar well realizes in multiplicity of languages the significance of English for Dalits and women. She argues that in absence of English the use of more personal 'you' *tu, tum* is used in Indian languages for women and Dalits but the same 'you' in English becomes sweet, beautiful and respectful. (252) She continues to underscore that these days everywoman, has been addressed 'Madam' because influence of English. The all pervasive influence of English has unknowingly forced to society to address a peon even in the plural form 'you', though a shame respect. Thus "English has generated self-respect, which finds expression even in the lowest of the low." (235) Prasad understanding the relevance of language constructed a temple of Goddess of English in Uttar Pradesh. He continues that "with the blessings of Goddess English, Dalit children will not grow to serve landlords or skin dead animals or clean drains or raise pigs and buffaloes.. . They will grow into adjudicators and become employers and benefactors. Then the roar of the Dalits, he says, will be heard by one and all." (BBC)

Understanding relevance of English in modern era, the then Tamil Nadu Chief Minister perceived north Indian Brahmins as imperialists. "DMK denounced the move to abolish English as brazen Hindi imperialism." (Aiyar) For promoting English and turning down the Hindi language, Annadurai was criticized throughout his life by the Jan Sangh. "One of those agitators was Atal Behari Vajpayee. How ironic is that the same Vajpayee should now boast about a Shining India based on comparative advantage in English!" (Aiyar) Thus the writers, politicians and economists comprehend English as the language of empowerment. The education initiatives, taken by the Britishers for untouchable, provided opportunities to millions of untouchables including Ambedkar who fought relentlessly for the rights of untouchables and women. Hindu Code Bill, Equal wages for men and women, decrease in working hours, leave for child-feed, reservation in parliament and government job are some major provisions.

In employment, the Britishers, unlike Hindus, recruited leather workers, sweepers and butchers in cantonments where they performed menial duties. The surprising fact is that they were recruited in army not as soldiers but for menial jobs. "During mutiny owing to the shortage of soldiers belonging to upper castes British changed their policy and began to recruit the Chamars and Chuhra as soldiers. They raised Mazhabi-Ramdassia Regiment and after giving some training sent them to Delhi and Uttar Pradesh to fight against the rebel soldiers. The British also raised a Mehtar Regiment in the Hindi belt and they were used not only as soldiers but were also employed to punish the upper caste soldiers in Uttar Pradesh (Kanpur)

and neighbouring states.” (Das) This is how untouchables inducted in employment with upper caste people in British army or administration. This induction was not to empower untouchables but to crush the mutiny by upper caste Indians and fight against the international powers in World Wars.

This is notable how the English ingeniously were in league with staunch adherent of caste system at almost all the occasions, except exceptions. The land settlements Acts’--1849-50, 1880, and 1914-15—legalisation of the restrictions and responsibilities of different *kameens*⁴ is evident enough to reveal the true nature of Britishers. According to land settlement Act (1914-15)⁵, as Madhopuri mentions in *Changiya Rukh*, scavengers or cobblers will receive only the carcasses for removal in the exchange of the cleaning and sweeping services—*begar*⁶. (6) He further evidences that Punjab Land Revenue Act 1887, Land Alienation Act 1901 as well, prevents “untouchables from buying land even when they had the money.” (Madhopuri 7) Besides, the “*Rajatnama (Chaudhary Haq rajatnama)*, law under *jagirdari* settlement maintained the system of sardars and chaudharys.” (Madhopuri 9) Thus the English in strong alliance with powerful caste people ruled India. Shepherd publically statement that Britishers came late and went early surprises in the given situation. However, his point of view regarding this may be only in context of arrangement of education for Dalits.

At cultural levels, as Wilberforce and Grant argues “the Indian Society is full of superstition, idolatry and tyranny of the priests.” (Anwar) Some westerners visiting India during colonial period depicted her as a land of ‘snake charmers and black magic.’ But more heart rending systems that prevailed during colonial period was such as female infanticide, Sati system, child marriage, widowhood, slavery, and breast tax etc. Among these, infanticide and Sati were visibly strategic murder under cover of religious culture by Hindus. The female infanticide was quite common among upper class Bengalis and Rajputs who perceived females as economic burden. Since it was immoral and heinous, the Bengal Regulation Acts of 1795 and 1804 declared this practice illegal and an Act was passed in 1870 for the prohibition of female infanticide. Thus female infanticide was abolished by Britishers. In addition to this, the British Government abolished the practice of *Sati* [widow burning] which was prevalent in upper caste Hindu society by Regulation of 1829 which was effective in first instance to Bengal Presidency alone and was extended its territory in 1830 later with modification to Madras and Bombay.

Moreover, child marriage was no less inhuman than the sati. It spoiled, particularly, life of countless girl children. Marriage for them was a physical tragedy as girls were married off at age of 6-7. The dislocation of pelvis bone and flesh hanging in shreds were quite common due to sex by grown-up men and deliveries in that age. (Mayo) The age of marriage was 10 and 12 in 1860 and 1891 respectively. In 1923, the bill for 13 years of age for marriage could not pass for the reason that it was against the dominant culture. In 1924, Madan Mohan Malviya, scholar, educational reformer and politician, opposed the bill presented by Hari Singh Gaud for 14 years of age for marriage. Later in 1925, 13 years of age for marriage for the girls was legalized. It is shocking that thousands of years of great past and some decades of colonial period could increase the age of marriage from 6-13 only. Finally, after Independence, the Child Marriage Restraint (Amendment) Act finalized the age 18 and 21 year for marriage girls and boys respectively.

After abolition of sati system, widow in India had to live a life of austerity, neglect and humiliation. In colonial period, the agenda of widow remarriage remained at priority of some social reformist groups. Consequently, many women colleges and universities came up. Additionally, these groups promoted

⁴ The shudra and untouchable communities and the very word is still in currency in derogatory sense for these communities.

⁵ The related portion of the Act is mentioned at page no. 6 in autobiography *Changiya Rukh* by Balbir Madhopuri

⁶ Service without wages.

widow-remarriage thus: *aa ja betee le le phere ek mara to aur bhatere* [Come O daughter, get married, if one dies there are many]. Later, Hindu Widows Remarriage Act, 1856 legalized the widow-remarriage which changed the life of millions of widows who “were expected to lead a life of austerity and extremities like no make-up, no new clothes, no good food, and boycott from festivals and even scolding from the all members of the family and society. Widows had to wear a white Saree of coarse material. The widow was considered as the unlucky person for the whole family.” (Singh)

Apart from these, one more inhuman practice in India based on caste structure was custom of breast tax. The “breast-tax” was enforced by the erstwhile State of Travancore in colonial India as lower castes women were not entitled to cover their breasts, defiance of which invited a heavy tax penalty. Tax collectors measured the breasts and levied tax accordingly— bigger the breasts, higher the tax and smaller the breasts lower the tax. And it was only after Nageli’s protest and, espousing the then British governor of Madras’s instructions, the Travancore’s kings issued two promulgations: by Maharaja Utram Thirunal and Maharaja Adyilyam Thirunal in 1859 and 1865 respectively. “Both the proclamations abolished the Breast Tax and lifted all restrictions on wearing the upper clothes.” (Pulapaka)

Thus it may be concluded that though imperialism has been a practice against the system of equality, co-existence and peace. It has of course been brutal owing to which billions of people died across world. It was exploitative in nature which not only exploited natural and economic resources but all the way round. Yet it has proved blessings in disguise for the people at lowest rung of hierarchy i.e. untouchables and women. As these human beings were deprived of their basic human rights and leading life worse than animal, the imperialism proved a milestone in their lives and empowered them by different policies and acts. Only because of imperial practices, governance and administration, the exploited and marginalized could gain some consciousness and see some light in their lives. The imperialism liberated, thought partially, them of centuries-old cultural and religious shackles i.e. sati system, breast tax, child marriage, lifelong widowhood, education to ex-untouchables and induction in Raj employment etc. but it paved tremendously the way for their emancipation and empowerment in future which is visible now. In nutshell, it may be said that empire empowered Indians, particularly marginalised, if looked from low. And the legacy of colonization is celebrated by all those who were victim of multi-layered marginalization and rejected by the dominant sections that were enjoying privileges on diverse structures and were reluctant to liberate their subordinates.

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⁷ A low caste revolutionary woman from Cherthala village in central Kerala who waged war against the custom of ‘breast tax.’ After defiance, when the tax collector forced her to pay tax, chopping her breasts off she presented them to tax collector on the banana leaf. The profuse bleeding led her to death.

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