Empire, Liberalism and the Rule of Colonial Difference: Colonial Governmentality in South Asia

Giorgio SHANI

Abstract

This article seeks to account for the ideological underpinnings of British colonial rule in South Asia. It will be argued, following Metcalf (1995), that two ‘ideologies of the Raj’ can be identified. The first of these, influenced by the Utilitarianism of Jeremy Bentham and James Mill, sought to transform Indian society in accordance with the liberal ideals of the Enlightenment. The second ideology essentialized caste, ethnic and religious differences between Indians. Rather than seeing both ideologies as mutually incompatible, it is argued that the latter ‘rule of colonial difference’ (Chatterjee 1994) reinforced the racist nature of much liberal discourse at the end of the nineteenth century. Colonial governmentality, consequently, developed along different lines from how Foucault (1991) considered it to have developed in Europe. While European populations were viewed by their state leaders as a homogenous, undifferentiated mass of individuals, colonial subjects were categorized and classified according to caste, ethnicity and religion. The legacy of colonial governmentality continues to be felt in South Asia today in the division of the subcontinent along ethno-religious lines and in the coexistence of socio-economic and cultural hierarchies with formal political equality.
The conquest of the earth, which mostly means the taking it away from those who have a different complexion or slightly flatter noses than ourselves, is not a pretty thing when you look at it too much. What redeems it is the idea only. (Conrad 1967:74)

The British conquest of South Asia was neither uniform nor sudden and its impact upon South Asia was both profound and uneven. Colonialism, did not, as Sudipta Kaviraj points out, come to India as one state invading or making demands on another but rather it presented itself and was taken seriously as a corporation: the multinational but British controlled East India Company (Kaviraj 2000:143). The British gradually consolidated their rule in the century after the Battle of Plassey in 1757 which afforded Company a territorial foothold in Bengal and did not succeed entirely in bringing the subcontinent under its control. Even at the height of the Raj, over 40% of her territory was under the control of local rulers, sultans and maharajas. No blueprint existed at state level for India’s subjugation and this presented the managers and functionaries of the company with an unprecedented problem: how to administer such a vast territory from London whilst continuing to make a healthy profit.

To what extent should the East India Company become involved in the governance of the territories under their control? Blatant coercive economic exploitation, although a feature of early Company rule in some parts of India, would in the long run prove to be counterproductive as suggested by the 1857 ‘mutiny.’ A system of governance was needed which depended upon the acquiescence, if not the consent, of indigenous elites in order to maintain the order and social stability required for trade to flourish. By the late eighteenth century, the East India Company was no longer just a trading company although it still retained its trading privileges. It had been transformed by Pitt’s India Act of 1784 into an organization equipped for rule, an embryonic, private but not autonomous leviathan, staffed with magistrates and judges. The British East India Company acquired many of the attributes of a state in a modern sense: it could wage war, make peace, raise taxes, and administer justice to its own employees and to increasing numbers of Indians who inhabited the territories in which the company was acting as sovereign (Cohn 1996:58). According to the 1784 settlement, the Company undertook to administer India subject to the approval of a Board of Control subordinate to Parliament. The Indian governor-general was
appointed by the company but subject to recall by Parliament (Metcalf 1995:17). British rule in India until the mutiny was effectively a public-private partnership between the Company, the Crown and Parliament.

As Crown replaced Company rule in the aftermath of the mutiny, a further problem arose, one of legitimation. On what grounds could a liberal, democratizing, ‘civilized’ society such as Britain legitimize autocratic rule over India? This question proved particularly problematic after the high noon of the Raj when Indian troops gave their lives in two world wars to protect the liberties to which their colonial masters were accustomed to but which they were denied.

**Imperial Ideologies: Liberalism and Colonial Difference**

Following Thomas Metcalf, we can isolate two distinct responses to this problem, strategies for administering India which, over the course of time, crystallized into ‘ideologies of the Raj’ (Metcalf 1995).

The first of these strategies, influenced by the Utilitarianism of Jeremy Bentham and his disciple, James Mill, sought to transform Indian society in accordance with the liberal ideals of the Enlightenment and saw first company and then crown rule, as a means of achieving such a transformation. Liberals saw human nature as universal and felt that reform could bring liberty and prosperity to the people of India just as the Repeal of the Corn Laws and the extension of the franchise by the 1832 Reform Act had done in Britain. Whereas in Britain, powerful constituencies of landed gentry and the aristocracy in general could attempt to block reform through their control of the House of Lords and through representation disproportionate to their numbers in the House of Commons, no such obstacles to reform existed in subjugated India. The natives had no constitutionally safeguarded ‘right’ with which to object to what may be seen as social engineering and thus opposition was muted. India became ‘something of a laboratory for the creation of a liberal administrative state’ (Metcalf 1995:29).

Indeed, the very formation of the metropolitan, nation state in the metropolis was as much a product of imperial expansion as it was domestic consolidation (Dirks 2002:314) for it afforded the reformers an opportunity to import some of its composite elements including a state sponsored education, a meritocratic civil service and even the codification of law back to the mother country itself.

At the heart of the ‘liberal’ ideology was a belief that eventually, given good governance and educated at the hands of their ‘civilized’ British superiors, the Indians too would one day be capable of self-government. Thomas Macauley
speculated in his speech on the 1833 renewal of the Company charter whether a
day would come when ‘the public mind of India may expand under our system till
it has outgrown our system’. Were such a day to come, Macauley promised to
neither attempt to ‘avert it or retard it’ considering it to be ‘the proudest day in
English history’ (Metcalf 1995:34). ‘Our system’ referred specifically to the rule of
law, the introduction of standardized impartial procedures for the settlements of
disputes. In the opinion of James FitzJames Stephens, legal member of the
viceroy’s Council from 1869 to 1872, ‘the establishment of a system of law which
regulates the most important parts of the daily life of the people constitutes in
itself a moral conquest more striking, more durable, and far more solid, than the
physical conquest which rendered it possible’ (Metcalf 1995:39). In order for the
rule of law to gain acceptance amongst Indians, priority was placed upon western
education. Thomas Macauley, author of the Minute on Colonial Education, had
made it abundantly clear that, in order for Indian society to be transformed in
accordance with liberal ideals, Indians themselves needed to be remade in the
image of her colonial masters. Instruction, particularly at the top echelons of the
Indian Civil Service was hitherto to be conducted exclusively in English since, as
Macauley disparagingly noted, the ‘entire native literature of India and Arabia
was not worth a single shelf of a good European library’ (Metcalf 1995:34).

The second strategy influenced more by the work of Orientalist scholars,
German Romantics and social Darwinists, emphasized the innate and
unbridgeable differences between Indians and Europeans. The turning point
proved to be the 1857 Sepoy Mutiny which has ruthlessly put down by British
and Punjabi troops. Ostensibly the causes of the Mutiny against Company rule
lay in the native mercenaries reluctance to use Lee-Enfield Rifles which allegedly
had been greased with animal fat, however, the revolt against British rule soon
encompassed many different groups across the Gangetic plain from Bihar to
Punjab and took the form of an attempt to restore the Mughal Emperor to his
former glory. The rebellion took over a year to be put down and signaled not only
the end of the Mughal Empire which had, in any case, largely ceased to exist
since the eighteenth century, but also the formal annexation of India into the
British Empire and the end of Company rule.

The annexation of India brought with it a related problem: how was India to
be classified? Though Great Britain might accommodate the peoples of Wales,
Scotland, and possibly, Ireland within the ‘united Kingdom’, India, like other
Asian and African territories later, could not be incorporated into the ‘imagined
community’ of the British nation as they were designated as ‘primitive’ and
‘backward’. Furthermore, because of her alien culture and customs, she could not be given the Dominion status which was accorded to those parts of the Empire inhabited by British settlers. India had, as the Mutiny suggested, not yet reached the requisite level of ‘civilization’ to be able to understand and enjoy the benefits of British rule and, thus, should be treated differently. This contrasted with the ‘progress’ made by the British working classes who had become sufficiently disciplined to be rewarded with the franchise by Disraeli’s Tories in 1867. Thus, ‘race,’ qualified the universalism of ‘the liberal project’. No longer was it possible, as had been the case before, for Englishmen to conceive of the lower classes as in some measure equivalent to the colonized peoples overseas: each subject to a state whose institutions ordered their lives, but allowed them no place in their deliberations (Metcalf 1995:55). Whatever their internal differences, British men (although not, until 1919, women) could feel united in dominion over, and in distinction from, their colonial ‘subjects’ beyond their own boundaries. India was to be the glittering ‘jewel in the crown’ and Queen Victoria, by the 1876 Royal Titles Bill, her ‘Empress’.

At the same time, an attempt was made, in keeping with contemporary ‘scientific’ theories of race, to rehabilitate traditional forms of royal authority in South Asia. The discovery of a common Indo-European language by Orientalist philologists such as Sir William Jones was put on racial foundations by Max Müller who argued that the *arya* speakers in fact constituted an ethno-racial group with common origins in the Caucasus. If Indians and Europeans were thus in the distant past part of the same ethno-linguistic family, then what could explain the different levels of ‘civilization’ attained. The rather crude response of British scholar-officials influenced by the pioneering work of Charles Darwin in the natural sciences was that Indian civilization had stagnated since the times of the *Vedas* as a result of racial intermingling with the indigenous Dravidian population. For example, W.W. Hunter in his *Annals of Rural Bengal* lamented the miscegenation of the fair-skinned ‘Aryans’ who were imbued with ‘that high sense of nationality which burns in the hearts of a people who believe themselves the depositary of a divine revelation’ with what he termed the ‘squat, black races’, ancestors of the modern day ‘tribal’ peoples of the North East (Bayly 1999b:77-8).

The prevalence of barbaric customs such as *sati*\(^1\) was seen as evidence of the decline of what came to be seen as an *Aryan* ideal. However, this decline was not

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1. *Sati* refers to the upper-caste Hindu practice of widow-burning, the incineration of a widow on her husband’s death, which was a *cause celebre* among the colonial authorities and Bengali religious reformers associated with the *Brahmo Samaj* in the early nineteenth century.
seen to have uniformly affected all the different ethno-linguistic and caste communities in South Asia. Some communities were seen to have declined to a greater extent than others. Thus, Darwin’s theory of evolution combined with the historicism of the Scottish Enlightenment philosophes allowed colonial authorities to classify the various communities of South Asia in terms of essential racial and cultural characteristics which were seen as indicative of the stage of civilization attained.

Susan Bayly notes that although ‘the growing numbers of British census takers, land revenue officials, military recruiters, public health officers, and even missionaries who compiled and interpreted all this data certainly did not subscribe to any one view of the Indian social order’, their attempts to analyze and manipulate what they understood as the concepts of caste, religion, and race in the subcontinent were often strongly marked by their awareness of what British and Continental scientists were saying about the history and future of humankind as a Darwinian “struggle for mastery” between higher and lower races, with the weak and inferior marked for extinction by their qualities of moral, physical and cultural backwardness. (Bayly 1999b:75).

Unsurprisingly, royal elites drawn from the higher Kshatriyas and Rajput castes were deemed to be in possession of a requisite standard of civilization to rule the peoples who inhabited their territories. Colonial policies of difference also classified Indians according to their propensity for warfare. Punjabis, were deemed ‘martial races’ suitable for employment in the security apparatuses of the merging colonial empire-state in contrast to ‘effeminate’ Bengalis (Fox 1985). To a large extent, this designation stemmed from physical appearance, with the existence of martial races explained by the presence of Aryan blood. Religious identities were similarly essentialized and racialized. The centrality of religious affiliation, along with caste, marked out, for the British, India’ essential ‘difference’ from the rational, enlightened West where, by the beginning of the twentieth century, society was seen as composed of atomized, individuals. Indian society in general, and Punjabi society in particular, was divided into separate, bounded and self-contained Hindu, Muslim and Sikh ‘communities’ which often ignored and cut across ethnic, linguistic and even kinship ties. Hindus were characterized as being passive, other-worldly and effeminate; Muslims were violent, despotic and masculine. The irreconcilable differences between these communities often found expression in communal conflict which, irrespective of
its actual causes, was considered as primordial to South Asian society (Pandey 1990) and could only be ‘controlled by the strong hand of the British’ (Cohn 1996:8) thus legitimating, in the eyes if the rulers, the continued imperial presence.

Both these strategies simultaneously helped shape British policy towards South Asia during the course of the nineteenth century, pulling it in often opposite directions, with the latter strategy which Chatterjee (1994) and Metcalf (1995) term the ‘rule of colonial difference’ emerging as hegemonic. The legal system of India, for example, accommodated both the assimilative ideals of liberalism through the codification of procedural law which created a public sphere common to all Indians characterized by rationality, and also the rule of colonial difference which found expression in a personal law defined by membership of a religious community. Thus, colonial rule recognized the particularity of Indian collective or communal identities in the ‘private sphere,’ whilst not allowing it to impinge upon legal procedures in the ‘public sphere’. This contrasted with the protection afforded to the state religion of the established Church of England back in Britain.

However, the rule of colonial difference should not be seen as a negation of but as complimentary to Liberal Enlightenment ideals which had become, by century’s end, increasingly racialized: embodied in the culture of white, protestant Europe. In keeping the with the doctrines of the Scottish Enlightenment and much liberal theory today, ‘civilization’ was equated with the formation of an ordered and beneficial polity in which individual rights and liberties were preserved, commerce and property secured, and despotic power held at bay (Bayly 1999b:72). ‘Europe’, or in today’s parlance, the ‘West’ was seen to be the embodiment of civilization, constituted by a discourse of rights, good governance and individual liberties. However, as Kaviraj puts it, ‘in order to believe what it wished to think about itself Enlightenment Europe required some negative beliefs about its others’ (Kaviraj 1994:46). The western self-definition was dependent upon, as Said (1978) amongst others has shown, a depiction of the Orient as the ‘Other’: hierarchical, primitive, repressive and despotic. Colonialism was conceived of as a ‘civilizing mission’ which benefited the ‘white man’s burden’ to impart civilization. Since, left to her own devices, it followed that India was incapable of ruling herself and needed to rely upon enlightened, alien rule to ‘civilize’ her. Whether she could in time break free of her indigenous values and ‘prejudices’ was to be the litmus test for the ‘liberal project’ in Asia, but in any case, was the responsibility of the natives not of their British overlords. Were the
'liberal project' to fail in Asia, it would merely reinforce the claims of the British to racial superiority.

Uday Singh Mehta has argued that imperialism, far from contradicting liberal tenets, in fact stemmed from liberal assumptions about reason and historical progress: assumptions which were only ‘revealed’ to a chosen people. Confronted with unfamiliar cultures such as India, British liberals could only see them as backward or infantile. In this, liberals manifested a narrow conception of human experience and ways of being in the world (Mehta 1999). Thus, the Enlightenment meta-narrative which stressed the rational equality of mankind also simultaneously allowed for the construction of new racialized hierarchies of difference. In the final analysis, rather than viewing liberalism, with its stress on universalism, and the colonial rule of difference, with its stress on ‘racial particularity, as contradictory strategies employed by the Raj to order their Empire, both may be viewed as complimentary ideologies which sought to legitimize the application of modern ‘scientific’ techniques of governmentality which had as their ‘targets’ subject populations. The agent responsible for the introduction of these techniques was the colonial state.

The Colonial State: Dominance without Hegemony

The Foreign rulers brought with them to India a concept of the state...that drastically changed ideas about power in India.(Khilnani 1997: 21).

The state is, as Kaviraj notes, utterly central to the story of modernity in India. It is not merely one of the institutions that modernity brings with it, for all institutions in a sense come through the state and it selective mediation (Kaviraj 2000:141). In Europe, the concentration of all regulatory functions in the instruments of the state was a gradual, historical process which started with the emergence of the absolutist state and its concomitant disciplinary forms, and developed with the rise of capitalism, nationalism and democracy. It corresponds to and may be seen as a product of what Foucault terms governmentality. For Foucault, governmentality refers to three things:

1. The ensemble formed by institutions, procedures, analyses and reflections, the calculations and tactics that allow the exercise of this very specific albeit complex form of power, which has as its target population, as its principal form of knowledge political economy, and as its essential technical means
apparatuses of security.

2. The tendency which, over a long period and throughout the West, has steadily led towards the preeminence of over all other forms (sovereignty, discipline etc) of this type of power which may be termed government, resulting, on the one hand, in the formation of a whole series of specific governmental apparatuses, and, on the other, in the development of a whole complex of saviors.

3. The process, or rather the result of the process, through which the state of justice of the Middle Ages, transformed into the administrative state during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, gradually becoming ‘governmentalized.’ (Foucault 1991a:102-3)

Colonial governmentality, however, differed significantly from governmentality in Europe. In the first place, the colonial state did not develop organically out of the internal logic of Indian society, as some have suggested, but was imposed upon it by colonizers ineradicably alienated from the people it ruled by markers of racial difference (Chatterjee 1994:18-25). As we saw, the main loci of authority before British colonialism were the jati and varna orders characterized by an asymmetrical dispersal of political, economic and religious functions. The state as such, whether Hindu or Muslim, did not intrude or seek to restructure social relations, but maintained a marginal presence in Indian society, confining itself to the extraction of surplus produce. The British, on the other hand, introduced a centralized apparatus of control characterized by the monopoly of the use of force by the British crown over India (Weber 1991). Whereas in traditional Indian society, power had been dispersed to many different layers of legitimate authority from the mythical ‘village’ community, through to regional kingdoms and Empires, colonial rule sought to invest in the state all forms of legitimate political authority. The transition from Company to Crown rule had, in the territories the British controlled, served to delegitimize traditional structures of political authority and, after the 1877 Royal Titles Act, had made Indians subjects of a British Empress. With the delegitimization of traditional political authority came the closure of existing channels of communication and grievance between rulers and ruled. Traditional and newly emerging elites needed to find a different audience with which, and a different language in which, to converse. This audience was, of course, the colonial state

2. Christopher Bayly, for example, has argued that the Raj was merely a continuation of pre-colonial forms of governance. For a critique of Bayly, and other members of the ‘Cambridge School’, see Chatterjee (1994:27-32).
which remained in the control of a tiny European elite. Thus, the colonial state underwent a process of construction in the most literal sense i.e. the complex of institutional mechanisms called the ‘state’ was literally ‘constructed’ by colonizers (Kaviraj 2000:143) on Indian soil using a tool-kit which borrowed heavily from developments in modern European history.

This leads us to the second key feature of colonial governmentality: that it was undemocratic in nature. Whilst democratization in Europe increasingly legitimized the modern state in the eyes of the ruled, in the process facilitating its ‘capture’ by the ‘people’ it helped to create, leading to its expansion and intrusion into the ‘private sphere’ of the market and even family with the development of the welfare state in the twentieth century, the doctrine of popular sovereignty was not extended to the colonies. Colonial rule might have been government for, or on behalf of, but it certainly was not government by the Indian people until the 1935 Government of India Act extended the franchise in response to nationalist mobilization. The colonial state initially sought to legitimize itself to its own people, not through reference to its alleged benefits to the people whom it governed but with reference to British interests. Only once these material interests were secured, did the colonial state attempt to legitimize its rule with reference to a civilizing mission, in the process adopting a tone of ‘reasonableness’ in its dialogue with British public opinion. The colonial ‘dialogue’ with its own people differed from its ‘dialogue’ with the indigenous middle class which was conducted through legislation and education. For the ‘distant popular masses’, however, there was no dialogue, rather a ‘monologue of force’ (Kaviraj 1994:21). The colonial state was unimpeded by the demands and rules of a newly enfranchised electorate and was therefore more powerful and repressive than the nation-state in the mother country (Kaviraj 1994:35).

The third distinctive feature of colonial governmentality was its relationship with capitalism. In Europe, the transition to capitalism was a gradual process, encompassing first an agricultural and then industrial revolution, which facilitated the emergence of an indigenous class, the bourgeoisie, whose ownership of the means of production and exchange in the private sphere was translated into a hegemony (Gramsci 1991) expressed in the public sphere through the establishment of a state conceived of an ‘organizing committee for the common affairs of the bourgeoisie’ (Marx 1977). In India, however, the establishment of a colonial state preceded and gave direction to capitalist transformation. Colonialism plainly was not, as David Washbrook has argued, ‘the logical outcome of South Asia’s own history of capitalist development’ (Washbrook 1988:76) but
was a precondition for the emergence of capitalism in India. Ranajit Guha has argued that modern colonialism was the historical condition in which capitalism came to dominate South Asia without effecting a democratic transformation in social relationships of power and authority. ‘Colonialism’, for Guha, ‘could continue as a relation of power in the subcontinent only on the condition that the colonizing bourgeoisie should fail to live up to its own universalizing project. The nature of the state it had created by the sword made this historically necessary’ (Guha 1982:5–6). The result was a society that was transformed by the colonial capitalism but in which vast areas in the life and consciousness of the people escaped any kind of hegemony. Although the colonial authorities introduced limited democracy through the Montagu-Chelmsford Reforms of 1919 and the 1935 Government of India Act, their rule was not hegemonic as it did not seek to legitimize its rule through the manufacture of consent amongst ordinary Indians through common-sensical frameworks. Thus, the colonial Indian culture defied understanding either as a replication of the liberal-bourgeois culture of nineteenth-century Britain or as the mere survival of an antecedent pre-capitalist culture. This was capitalism but without capitalist hierarchies, a capitalist dominance without a hegemonic capitalist culture—or, in Guha’s famous term, ‘dominance without hegemony’ (Guha 1997: 97–98). Following Guha, colonial rule may be characterized by dominance without hegemony and the colonial state, the embodiment of the political sphere in colonial Indian, may be seen as both a product and a condition of possibility of such domination.

Although not hegemonic, the colonial state however introduced into South Asian society an institutional arena, the public sphere, where hegemony, or rather hegemonies, could potentially develop. In other words, the colonial state facilitated the imagination of collective indigenous identities, including the Indian nation. It did this through the introduction of modern scientific techniques of classification and enumeration which transformed the political landscape of South Asia and continue to shape its politics today. The introduction of the Censuses in particular transformed previously ‘fuzzy’ into ‘enumerated’ communities (Kaviraj 1992; 1994; 1997; 2000). Traditional South Asian society was characterized by the co-existence of a plethora of, seen from modern eyes, potentially contradictory identities. Examples include localized jati identities and forms of religious affiliation, such as Bhakti and Sufism which cut across religious boundaries. Rarely, if ever, would people belong to a community which could claim to represent or exhaust all the layers of their complex selfhood. Furthermore, it would not occur to an individual to ask how many of them were
in the world (Kaviraj 1994: 32-3). Although contact with people of different jatis, caste and religions were, in many cases, frequent, no universally applicable rules existed for the dealing with difference. Different rules or customs prescribed different patterns of behaviour towards different groups. Identities were seen as indeterminate, contextual and fluid.

The Census, however, introduced in 1872 and carried out on a decennial basis from 1881, facilitated the emergence of essentialized identities. Almost half a million people, most of whom were volunteers were engaged in the collection of basic information about not only the age, residence and occupation, but also the caste, ethnicity and religion of each individual Indian. As Bernard S. Cohn points out, ‘what was entailed in the construction of census operations was the creation of social categories by which India was ordered for administrative purposes’ (Cohn 1996:8). The Census objectified religious, social and cultural difference. The categories of caste and religion were seen as homogenous and mutually exclusive- it was deemed as irrational for someone to claim to be both Kshatriyas and Vaishyas as to profess Sikhism and Hinduism as one’s religious affiliation despite the ‘fuzziness’ of caste and religious boundaries in the colonial Punjab. Furthermore, the colonial state facilitated the enumeration of these communities through the inauguration of a process of statistical counting and spatial mapping. As Kaviraj has pointed out, ‘before the coming of modern statistical processes, people could not have a clear idea about the distribution of groups over territories, and therefore of their agentive potential in a political sense’ Kaviraj 1997:326). Enumeration facilitated the transformation of local caste or ethno-religious into national political communities. As local communities lost their intimacy and immediacy (Kaviraj 1997:331), the terms ‘Hindu’ and ‘Muslim’ were emptied of all religious and philosophical significance and became markers of distinct, homogenous and potentially conflictual political identities at an all-India level through the formation of the Muslim League and the Hindu Mahasabha. The ‘Hindus,’ for example, may have found themselves in a minority in the Punjab, but would have been encouraged by Census returns which showed that, despite their declining numbers in comparison to other political communities, they formed an overwhelming majority of the Indian ‘population’. ‘Muslims’, on the other hand, found themselves in a ‘majority’ in two distinct regions in northern

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3. Essentialised here denotes a sense of immutability which comes from a denial of historical change. However, as Kaviraj has pointed out, essentialism need not take this form but may also suggest an appearance of stability which comes from an ability to withstand historical change in such a way that the core or essence of a community remains undisturbed (Kaviraj 1994: 42-3).
India, separated by a Hindi belt that stretched for a thousand kilometers. Sikhs, as we shall see later, discovered that they were nowhere in a majority and were uniquely disadvantaged by the coming of modern, majoritarian politics.

Thus, whilst governmentality in Britain treated the ‘population’ as a homogenous, undifferentiated mass of individuals (Foucault 1991), colonial governmentality recognized and built upon ‘primordial’ categories of caste and religion. The colonial state did this through the introduction of separate electorates and employment opportunities for ethno-religious ‘communities’. The Montagu-Chelmsford Reforms introduced separate electorates for Muslims in 1919 paving the way for the communalization of South Asian politics. Similarly, in 1932 Communal Award introduced separate electorates for ‘Depressed Castes’. To Indian nationalists, this appeared as a concerted attempt by the imperial authorities to fracture the nationalist movement on ethno-religious and caste lines.

**Colonial Political Economy: Capitalism and (Under)development**

The twin ideologies of the Raj were both reflected in, and helped shape the colonial political economy of South Asia. Whilst undoubtedly commercial incentives led to the strategic involvement of the East India Company in the South Asia, the transition from Company to Crown rule led to an increased role for the state in the political economy of South Asia. The colonial state may be seen as the agent responsible for the fulfillment of what Marx referred to as the ‘imperial mission in Asia’: laying the foundations of capitalism.

The state had two potentially contradictory objectives: extracting through taxation, maximum land revenue from Indian agriculture and increasing, through massive capital investment, industrial and agricultural productivity (Fox 1985:15). The first objective, to return to Marx, was ‘destructive’, necessitating the underdevelopment of Indian agriculture. The right of Permanent Settlement, first introduced by Cornwallis in Bengal in 1793, established a regressive system of taxation, the ‘zamindari’ system which revolutionized rural South Asian society in the regions where this was implemented. Zamindars were landlords who were taxed a fixed amount directly by the Company, irrespective of the quality of harvests, who in turn would tax peasants in order to pay the company. Thus, the old pattern of Indian agrarian society was replaced by a new system, with a class of landed magnates made subordinate to the colonial regime, in the process becoming its principal allies. It was this alliance’ between the colonial state and the Zamindars that made sustained colonial rule and the exploitation of ‘village’
India possible. Under the regime of the East India Company land revenue was collected with ‘a rapacity and ruthlessness that was unknown under preceding Indian regimes’ (Alavi 1989:9). The Zamindari system, however, made agricultural improvement difficult and Indian agriculture was characterized by low rates of agricultural productivity. Although the imperial mission stopped short of ‘the annihilation of old Asiatic society’, it did lead to pervasive rural poverty and, in the 1770s, late 1890s and early 1940s, famines. Just over a decade after independence, 40% of the rural population and half the urban population remained under the poverty line and average life expectancy was 40 years old (Corbridge and Harriss 2000:12).

The second objective was ‘regenerating’, entailing laying ‘the material foundations of Western society in Asia’ (Marx 1977:332) by bringing South Asia into an emerging world economy, characterized by a single division of labour (Wallerstein 1974), through improved communications particularly railways and canals. British industry, however, benefited disproportionately from this capital investment, giving rise to the view amongst Indian nationalists and some Marxists that India was underdeveloped by Britain. Early nationalists such as Dadabhai Naoroji and R.C. Dutt complained that the development of Indian capitalism was being retarded by an unwarranted ‘drain’ of India’s wealth to Britain through the Council Bill system (Corbridge and Harriss 2000:14). Through the system of ‘home charges,’ the Government of India had to remit large sums to the home government as payment for all costs of the British administration in India. These included: support of the Indian army, state pensions for civil servants and military officers, the maintenance of colonial property and administrative expenditure from famine relief to intelligence gathering (Fox 1985:21). Furthermore, throughout the nineteenth century, the Indian trade surplus helped to balance Britain’s trade deficit with the rest of the world. India’s trade surplus stemmed from its export of raw materials. Once the East India Company acquired a large local source of funds in the form of land revenue, it was no longer necessary for Britain to pay for India’s textile exports in bullion and precious stones as it had so far done. It could now buy Indian textiles from the wealth that it extracted from South Asians. Textiles for exports were bought from the huge amounts of land revenue that now accrued to the Company and its employees.

The development of underdevelopment thesis, first proposed by the dependencia school of Latin American economists in the 1970s (Frank 1973), has been applied to South Asia by Hamza Alavi who advances the argument that
India was well on the road to capitalism until the colonial state intervened to protect the interests of the ‘Lancashire’ lobby (Alavi 1989:9-13). According to Alavi, South Asian society in the seventeenth century, except for its military and especially naval weakness, was fully equal, in the arts of manufacture and agriculture and culture, to the Europeans at the time. Contrary to the stereotype of the medieval Indian society as a stagnant rural backwater there was a high degree of urbanization, with Delhi, Agra and Fatepuhr Sikri as populous as any of their European counterparts. A high proportion of the Indian urban population was employed in industrial crafts. The manufacturing industry was geared not only to the supplying the demand of the domestic market but also to producing a rapidly growing volume of exports. The flourishing textile industry was central to South Asia’s relative prosperity and quickly attracted the interest of the East India Company. The East India Company had a large interest in the continuation of Indian textile exports but this conflicted with the interests of the British textile industry located in Lancashire. Under pressure from the ‘Lancashire’ lobby, the Company’s profitable trading monopoly was ended in 1813 and in 1833 it was required to stop its commercial operations altogether, becoming exclusively an organ of colonial government. To enable the British textile industry to survive, the protective duty against Indian textiles was raised once again in 1813 to 85% (Alavi 1989:11). Alavi’s argument is that the dynamic growth of British industry was made possible by a large and sustained inflow of resources extracted from India and, indeed, colonised societies everywhere. As Eric Williams has argued, a colonial ‘Triangular Trade’ financed the Industrial Revolution in Britain. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Britain sold textiles to Africa and used the proceeds to capture slaves who were sold at great profit in the West Indies, with the profits often used to purchase sugar. Although Williams’s thesis has been contested by economic historians who claim that the income from the Triangular Trade was insignificant in the context of the capital generated by Britain’s ‘Great Transformation’, there was, as Alavi points out, a huge flow of resources into Britain from the colonial enterprise all over the world. India alone contributed between two and four million pounds a year at a critical period of the industrial revolution (Alavi 1989:12). The colonial ‘drain’ of wealth into Britain was, therefore, not limited to that arising from what Williams calls the Triangular Trade and may be generalized as an explicitly colonial mode of production. The colonial mode of production is characterized by the production of raw materials for export and the import of manufactured goods from the metropolis. Alavi claims that this mode of production did not take shape until the second half of the
19th century when the power of the colonial state was brought to bear on South Asian society.

Nowhere was the power of the colonial state felt more than in the Punjab. Whilst the three colonial port cities of Madras, Calcutta and, especially, Bombay became integrated nodal points in the colonial world economy, the Punjab remained predominately rural, but unlike other regions such as Bihar or the United Provinces, it became a beneficiary of British state capitalism. The Punjab saw an extensive development of irrigation and ‘colonization’ of vast tracts of arid land which transformed it into the ‘bread basket’ of India – just as the ‘green revolution’ was to do almost a century later. Initially, the British sought to harness the Punjab’s agricultural production and labour to the world economy without radical social transformation or major capital investment. They built upon the pre-existing patterns of cultivation in the Punjab. Richard Fox isolates three distinct regions of the colonial Punjab characterized by cultivation type, cropping pattern, degree of intensity of cultivation, and ownership system. Furthermore, these three regions corresponded to a tripartite division of the Punjab on mainly religious lines. Cultivation in the arid lands of south eastern Punjab took the form of the production of millet and gram, required little irrigation and was carried out predominately by Hindu peasant proprietors. West Punjab was ruled by landlords and overwhelmingly Muslim and arid, requiring irrigation. However, the central Punjab, previously the stronghold of Maharajah Ranjit Singh and including the Malhwa, Manha and Doaba regions as well as Princely states such as Patiala, contained the most fertile land and contained a mixed Hindu-Sikh population of peasant proprietors (Fox 1985:30-1). The British built upon existing indigenous social structures and sought to remove Ranjit Singh’s landed intermediaries. Thus, the central districts exhibited a far more egalitarian social structure than those areas to the west where the British elected to work through landlords, considering them either too powerful and/or influential to remove. The result was that the central districts provided the central government with a large and dependable amount of a cash crop, wheat, which was suitable for export to other regions of India and even the mother country herself.

Conclusion

At the outset of this chapter, the question was posed that on what grounds could a liberal, democratizing, ‘civilized’ society such as Britain legitimize autocratic
rule over hundreds of millions of people half way across the world. It has been suggested that the colonial authorities never attempted to legitimize colonial rule in the eyes of those whom they governed and thus, following Guha and Kaviraj, colonial rule can not be seen as hegemonic relying as it did upon a ‘monologue of force’ between it and the ‘popular, distant masses’. Thus, colonial governmentality differed markedly from governmentality as it developed in Europe; while governmentality in Britain treated the ‘population’ as a homogenous, undifferentiated mass of individuals (Foucault 1991), colonial governmentality recognized and built upon seemingly ‘primordial’ categories of caste and religion through the introduction of separate electorates and employment opportunities for ethno-religious ‘communities’. This was a reflection of the ‘rule of colonial difference’ (Chatterjee 1994) which essentialised the differences between Indians, on the one hand, and between Indians and the rational, enlightened West, on the other. Although the ‘rule of colonial difference’ is conventionally viewed as inimical to liberalism, it has been argued following Uday Singh Mehta (1999), that it was indeed compatible to liberal Enlightenment ideals which had become, by century’s end, increasingly racialized: embodied in the culture of white, protestant Europe.

In conclusion, rather than viewing liberalism, with its belief in universalism, and the colonial rule of difference, with its stress on ‘racial ’particularity, as distinct and contradictory ideologies, both may be seen as mutually reinforcing discourses which helped shape colonial governmentality and influence South Asia’s subsequent political development. The legacy of colonial governmentality can be seen today in the division of the subcontinent along ethno-religious lines and in the coexistence of the world’s largest democracy with an authoritarian, military dictatorship; formal, legal equality with social, cultural and ethnic hierarchies; capitalist with pre-capitalist modes of production; and high rates of economic growth with even higher rates of poverty, malnutrition and illiteracy. To return to Conrad: if the ‘idea’ alone was capable of redeeming ‘the conquest of the earth’, then one can conclude that colonialism ‘was not a pretty thing when you look at it too much’.

Bibliography

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