History

Lesson 2 of an enquiry of 4 lessons

Colonialism in India

Enquiry: What did British colonialism look like in the nineteenth century?

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By 1857, the British East India Company had claimed control over large parts of India. In 1857, the British Empire in India suffered a massive shock. Many Indians rebelled against British rule in an event that has been given many different names: the 'Indian Mutiny', the 'Indian Rebellion' or the 'First War of Indian Independence'. In order to restore British control, the British used military force against Indian rebels. They used brutal punishments to strike terror into the Indian population. For example, rebels were strapped to cannons and blown to pieces. This was deliberately designed to prevent them from having a proper Hindu or Muslim burial. One British official justified this punishment by saying that violence was 'the only way to strike terror into [India's] semi-**barbarous** people'. This racist attitude was a widespread belief among the British.

Political dominance and distant rule

The years after 1857 were defined by British attempts to rebuild and justify their political dominance in India. The East India Company was **abolished** and the British government took direct control over India. Queen Victoria was officially at the top of the hierarchy of power and assumed the title of 'Empress of India' in 1877. A **Viceroy** was appointed to represent the Queen in India and lead the government of the colony. The Indian **Civil Service** was established to run the country. The higher positions were reserved for white British men, while Indians could have jobs lower down the hierarchy. Overall, this was a system of political rule that was very distant from the people of India. India's population had very little say in how they were governed. There were clear cultural and racial barriers. British civil servants in India generally lived separately from Indians. Furthermore, white men were increasingly discouraged from marrying Indian women, due to British fears that this would corrupt what they saw as the 'superior' white race. The law favoured white British people and often white people were let off for the beating or even killing of Indian workers. To many Indians, therefore, British rule and law did not seem like it offered them protection and security.

Economic progress?

After the rebellion of 1857, the British increasingly tried to justify their rule in India. Why should Britain rule a people who, in 1857, tried to get rid of them? One of the ways in which the British justified their rule was by claiming that British rule was bringing 'progress' and civilisation' to India. From 1861, the British started publishing an annual 'Moral and Material Progress report'. One of the main things that this report focused on was the building of railways. Railways looked to the British like evidence of progress. But who did the railways actually help? In 1863, the British Governor of Bombay made a speech to celebrate the opening of a new railway. He boasted that the railways were a great British achievement. He commented that the railways would boost British military strength. He said little, however, about the railways helping the Indian people. In fact, he even suggested that the greatest benefits to Indians would come not from travelling on the railways, but from working to build them. To many Indians, therefore, the railways did not seem like progress for them.

Famine

Between 12 and 30 million Indians are estimated to have died in the last quarter of the nineteenth century in some of the worst **famines** in history. The Indian district of Bellary is one example of a place that experienced famine. In Bellary, the arrival of cheap cloth made in British factories meant that many Indian women lost their jobs making cloth. Meanwhile the price of food was rising and bad weather conditions meant that the farming work carried out by many Indian men collapsed. As a result, Indian peasant families could not afford enough food to eat. The British government's response was slow and inadequate. The most common form of relief that the British provided was work relief, in which starving Indians had to carry out hard physical labour in return for a small amount of money and food. Furthermore, this relief did nothing to solve the big issue of increasing poverty. Between 1876 and 1877, around one-fifth of Bellary's population of around 1 million people died.

Resistance and self-help

Different groups in Indian society responded to British colonialism in different ways. Peasants waged campaigns and protests in the countryside against British plantation owners and rich Indian landowners. For example, in the Indigo Revolt of 1859, peasants protested against being forced, often violently, to plant indigo (a plant used to make blue dyes for clothes to be sold in Europe). The government used the military to crush the revolt, killing a number of peasants. However, the peasants did succeed in the end, as in 1860 the government passed the Indigo Act which made it illegal for British planters to force peasants to grow indigo. An increasingly popular response to British colonialism in the late nineteenth century was the idea of 'self-help'. This was the idea that Indians could not rely on the British colonial government to help them, so they should set up their own organisations to help themselves. Indian religion and culture were important in these efforts. In the small town of Deoband, a centre for Islamic education was set up, called Darul Uloom ('the house of knowledge'). Meanwhile, Arya Samaj was a Hindu organisation set up for the improvement of India. One of its founders, Lajpat Rai, helped to set up the Punjab National Bank in 1894. This bank was designed to help Indian people and businesses, who were often not given any help by British banks.

Challenge reading: Sayyid Mahmood

Sayyid Mahmood was born in 1850 in Delhi. His father worked for the Indian Civil Service and had strong beliefs about how Indians should respond to British rule. He believed that Indians should accept that the British had won and had conquered India; Indians should live their own lives, accepting British rule, but generally staying separate from the British. Sayyid, who by his twenties had become a lawyer, had different ideas. He disliked the idea that the British had conquered India. He also disliked the arrogant and distant nature of British rule. Instead, he thought that the British and Indians should share power and work together more closely as friends. In 1887, Sayyid Mahmood was made a judge in the Allahabad High Court - a very important position. In this important role, Sayyid was surrounded by white British judges. This was a chance for Sayyid to work together with the British. Over time, however, Sayyid became frustrated. Sayyid would spend hours and hours writing detailed judgements on his cases. By contrast, Sayyid saw that British judges often rushed to quick decisions and did not take the law seriously. Furthermore, the British judges excluded Sayyid from meetings and did not treat him as an equal. By 1893, constant arguments between Sayyid and the British judges meant that Sayyid, North India's only Muslim High Court judge, was sacked.

Comprehension Questions

1. What happened in 1857 and how did the British respond?
2. In what ways was British rule distant from the Indian people?
3. Who were the railways for?
4. How did Indian people try to help themselves?
5. Challenge question (read the challenge reading to answer this): What does the story of Sayyid Mahmood tell us about the barriers facing Indian people under British colonialism?

Glossary

Abolished - formally put an end to a system or institution

Barbarous - uncivilised or backward

Civil service - an institution made up of people who help to run the government

Famine - extreme lack of food

Viceroy - the title given to the top governor in India