



Research Paper

British Colonialism in India with Special Emphasis on Assam: A Historical Review

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ABSTRACT:

British colonialism was mainly for the extension of their socio-economic and political dominion without considering the general interest of the common people. They started their colonization process, in addition to world countries, in various parts of Indian states. The actual commencement of British colonialism in India took place after the acquisition of Diwani of Bengal, Bihar and Orissa by the signing of the treaty of Allahabad in 1765 but in Assam only after the first Anglo-Burmese war (1824-26) concluded by the treaty of Yandaboo (1826). So, British rule in various parts of India paralyzed the socio-economic and political backbone of Indian people. Subsequently, emerged nationalism in India and in the nook and corners of Indian states which helped in attaining Indian independence in 15th August, 1947. But the impact of British colonialism in the remotest region of Assam has not been properly elaborated. So, attempt has been made to focus on the British colonialism in Indian untouched region of north eastern states of British India.

KEYWORDS: British Colonialism, exploitation, nationalism, remotest region, independence.

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I. INTRODUCTION:

Definition of Colonialism: Colony, colonization, colonialism—these terms are said to be connected with the powerful nation like the British who tried their level best to dominate, colonize and exploit the poor nation without considering the interest of general masses. So, colonization means exploitation in socio-economic and political aspects upon the Indians by the British for their own selfish interest without considering the interest of the people of India. So, colonialism is nothing but the forceful domination through extension of territories and exploitation in all aspects of life upon the people of India.

Encyclopedia Americana defined colonialism by saying: “Colonialism denotes the resultant complex of political and economic controls advanced by advanced capitalist society over their dependencies in backward parts of the world.”

British Colonialism is a concept and a very important instrument to exploit the people in the socio-economic and political aspects without considering the interest of the Indians through using force and terror as well as enforcing Divide and Rule policy in India that led to them impoverished.

This colonial concept greatly helped the Britishers in undertaking their colonization process ignoring the developmental programmes that may enrich the Indian minds. So, colonial rule provided the Indians the idea of nationalism—political, social and economic through the formation of various socio-political organizations and thereby deep-rooted nationalism provoked the Indians to fight against the colonial British government through their participation in the freedom struggle in India.

British Colonialism in the World Countries: Colonialism of the British was not only confined on Indian soil but also upon other world countries. It is observed that the English established their 13 colonies in the United States of America on the issue of which American war of Independence (1776-1783) took place against British colonialism.

We also find their colonial penetration into China initially through sending opium to be addicted by Chinese people for making them indolent. Subsequently on the question of opium along with other colonial practices led to the first opium war (1839-42) which was concluded by the treaty of Nanking in 1842. The initial defeat of China at the hands of the British and influence of other European countries on China led to a series of

events in Chinese history and finally Chinese anti-colonial reconstruct against the British led to the establishment of Chinese Republic in 1949. We also find the reference of colonial penetration of the British in Africa and in some cases they tried to colonize upon some European countries for their economic interest. The English East India company, as a commercial power and master of sea, did not lagging behind in establishing their colonial hold in India and its various remotest states.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY: The study aims at:

- i. To find out the policy of British exploitations in various parts of Indian territory like Assam.
- ii. To find out the impact of colonialism in India and in Assam along with its various districts.
- ii. To awaken the future generation of India to be alert regarding the penetration of such colonial power in our country and to keep intact the national and cultural identity of our people.

II. METHODOLOGY:

To find out the objects of the study, analytical method was followed based on both primary and secondary sources. Informations collected from respondents of the fields were also critically analyzed.

III. LITERATURE REVIEW:

Large number of books on British India and of Assam has already been published but all those books do not elaborate colonialism covering all the parts of Indian territories except few instances.

1. H K Barpujari in his book, "The Comprehensive History of Assam," Vol-V, Gawahati, 1993 discussed many things about Assam but British colonialism was not explained in detail.
2. S L Baruah in his book "A Comprehensive History of Assam," New Delhi, 1985 highlighted the total Assam history but we get slight discussion of British colonialism in the Brahmaputra valley but not of Barak valley.
3. Anuradha Dutta in his book "Assam in the Freedom Movement", Calcutta, 1991 highlighted various aspects of freedom movement of the Bramaputra valley but Barak valley region is untouched.
4. A R Desai in his book "Social Background of Indian Nationalism", Bombay, 1991 also explained the growth of nationalism and colonial exploitation but remotest area of north east region is not explained in detail.

IV. DISCUSSION, RESULTS AND FINDINGS:

British Colonialism in India: The English East India company, as a colonial commercial power and master of sea, did not lagging behind in establishing their colonial hold in India and its various remotest states. Colonialism in India can be discussed under the following heads:

1). Emergence of English East India Company as a Political Power (1707-1765)

It was a continuous process undertaken by the British though English East India Company outwardly showed themselves as a commercial power. Now question arises how English East India Company emerged as a colonial plus political power and what were their steps in various stages to colonize India?

The English East India Company emerged as a political power not in a day. It was only after the death of Aurangzeb (1707), the prevailing situation and diplomatic handling of Company's officials from 1707 to 1765 helped the British in establishing their colonial hold in India through the acquisition of Dewani rights in Bengal in 1765 by the Treaty of Allahabad.

However, the English East India Company came to India as a commercial power and gradually the British emerged as a political power. The background of the commencement of British rule in India can be traced out after the death of Aurangzeb (1707) till the signing of the Treaty of Allahabad (1765) by which the British under Robert Clive acquired the Diwani of Bengal, Bihar and Orissa.

However, after the death of Aurangzeb in 1707, internal conflict within the Mughal court among the ministers and nobility led to the decline of Mughal Empire. Taking advantage of the weakness of the latter Mughals, Marathas established their hold in India under the effective leadership of Shivaji. After the downfall of the Marathas, some regional powers emerged to establish their supremacy during this turmoiling situation and declared their independence. Among them, mention may be made of Bengal, Oudh, and Hyderabad. It is to be noted here that the death of Aurangzeb, rise and fall of Marathas, emergence of regional powers provided opportunity to the foreign European companies to establish their commercial centres in various parts of India.

Advent of four European companies like the Dutch, Portuguese, French and the English East India Company led to the commercial rivalries among them. In this competition, the Dutch and the Portuguese companies failed to compete and thereby they left India. Subsequently the French East India Company under Dupleix and the English East India under Robert Clive fought for their commercial supremacy. Both the rival leaders of these two companies engaged themselves in three Carnatic wars in South India. Dupleix, the leader of the French East India Company failed to compete with Robert Clive, leader of British East India Company. Because, the English got all types of support from home government whereas the French East India Company

did not get it. So, the French failure in the Carnatic wars paved the way of establishing British supremacy in India as a paramount political power.

The political situation of Bengal and the internal conflict among the Nawabs of Bengal after Alivardi Khan greatly helped the British in establishing political supremacy in India. The Battle of Plassey (1757) and the Battle of Buxar(1764) were the two most important events that provided Robert Clive the opportunity to play tricks in establishing political supremacy in India.

When Siraj Ud-Daula assumed power after Alivardi Khan in 1756, he was openly challenged by Ghasiti Begum and Shaukat Jung. These two rival contenders were supported by the British that created resentment in the minds of Siraj –ud –daula. Not only this, Kishan Das affairs, Question of trade privileges, additional fortifications of the English, Capture of Calcutta and so called Black Hole Incident etc led to the outbreak of the battle of Plassey on 23rd June, 1757. As a result of this battle, English became the defacto ruler of Bengal and subsequently it led to the establishment of British dominion in India.

After the Battle of Plassey, Siraj ud daula was replaced by Mir Jafar as the Nawab of Bengal. The company as the king maker and unmaker in Bengal, Mir Jafar was also replaced by Mir Kasim. Subsequently Battle of Buxar took place in 1764 between the English and Mir Kasim, Shah Alam II, and Shuja-ud-daula. The victory of the English in the Battle of Buxar led to the humiliation and surrender of Mir Kasim and his supporters-Shah Alam II (Mughal Emperor) and Shuja-ud-daula (Nawab of Oudh) to the British. Finally the English East India company became paramount political power through the signing of the Treaty of Allahabad between Robert Clive and Shah Alam II, Shuja –ud-daula in 1765. Because, by the treaty of Allahabad (1765), the English East India Company acquired the Diwani rights over Bengal, Bihar and Orissa. It is to be noted here that the Battle of Plassey signaled the beginning of British expansion in Bengal, Battle of Buxar firmly planted the British mastery in India. However, it is right to say that the actual commencement of British rule in India started from 1765 as by the signing of the Treaty of Allahabad; British became the dual authority both in economic and political administration in India.

So, it is observed that the turmoiling situation cropped up in India due to the weakness of later Mughals after the death of Aurangzeb (1707), rise of Marathas under Shivaji, emergence of regional political powers like Bengal, Oudh, Hyderabad, advent of four European companies-Dutch, Portuguese, French East India Company, and the English East India Company and their success in commercial competition, three consecutive Carnatic wars, two major battles like Battle of Plassey (1757), Battle of Buxar (1764) and the Treaty of Allahabad signed in 1765 provided opportunity to the EIC in establishing the political domination in India.

But British rule started in Assam after the first Anglo-Burmese war (1824-26) concluded by the treaty of Yandaboo (1826) through the annexation of Lower Assam (1828) and Upper Assam (1838). The British reorganized their administration in Assam keeping colonial interest in mind initially under four Commissioners namely David Scott, Roberson, Pemberton and Jenkins till 1861. Next administration of Assam was placed under Chief Commissioners from 1874 who colonized the then Assam the process of which continued till 1947.

Similarly Cachar (present Cachar and Hailakandi) was annexed in 1832 and placed its administration first under the Superintendents (1832-66) and then under the Deputy Commissioners (1866-1947) of Cachar. The colonization process of the British in Cachar left a deep impact on the Indian national movement as the Cachar people organized themselves to fight against the British through attending INC sessions since the inception of the foundation of Indian National Congress in 1885.

2. Commencement of British Colonialism in India (1765-1857):

(a) Economic colonialism (b) Political Colonialism (c) Socio-cultural colonialism

(a) Economic colonialism: If we want to trace out the economic colonialism during 1765 to 1857, we will have to find out the economic policy formulated by the EIC. As we know that EIC after the acquisition of Diwani rights of Bengal, Bihar and Orissa by the Treaty of Allahabad signed in 1765, Robert Clive introduced the Dual System of Government in 1765 which continued upto 1772. Robert Clive got the economic rights that is right to collect revenue without shouldering any administrative responsibility. Subsequently right from Warren Hastings, the English formulated the economic policy in such way that led to the sufferings of the peasants, businessmen and the people who earned their livelihood on cottage industries.

Accordingly, the British economic exploitation started in **Triangle Process** from the very inception of their rule which had been elaborated by Dadabhai Naoroji in his thesis "**Poverty and Un British Rule in India**" through propounding the "**Theory of Drain.**" The main target of the British was to impoverish the Indians by all possible means that can be visualized from the statement: "**Turning the people into hewers of wood and drawers of water.**"

Moreover, **R.P. Dutt** explained **the colonial exploitation** on the three successive stages..

i) 1757-1813-Direct Plunder

ii) 1813-1858-General Plunder

ii) 1858 onwards-De-industrialization

Now question arises-what are the triangle process of colonization in India? In reply it can be stated as follows:

1. Land Revenue System: Agriculture was the backbone Indian rural economy. The British introduced a set of land revenue system right from Warren Hastings who initially introduced one year settlement, then five year settlement to enrich royal treasury but in vain. So, Lord Cornwallis introduced the Permanent Settlement in Bengal in 1793 at a fixed and maximized rate. As per this system, peasants were bound to pay the revenue at a maximized rate and if any peasant fails to pay land revenue in time even at the time of famine, they had to surrender their land and became landless peasant. These landless peasants under circumstances had to work in British industries at a very nominal rate of wages for existence. So; Indian peasants were made labour through the colonization process and their sufferings knew on bounds.

Another group of peasants borrowed money from British Capitalists at a very high rate of interest to pay revenue for the protection of their agricultural land and after harvesting their crops, major portion of their product had to pay to the capitalists. The remaining portion of product could not cover their family expenses and the peasants repeatedly borrowed money from these British agents –the **Capitalists**. This led to the growth of **Rural Indebtness** in Indian society due to the colonial penetration in India.

In addition to these, the introduction of Mahalwari system, Ryotwari system also paralyzed the economic backbone of Indian peasants.

The changed agrarian policy of the British specially the **Commercialization of Indian agriculture** enforced by the British in India compelled the peasants to cultivate only cash crops that satisfy only the colonial interest, not the Indian interest. This also ruined the Indian peasants economically.

The process of economic exploitation in Assam was made through the introduction of money economy enhancing the rate of land revenue in a gradual process that led to the outbreak of four consecutive peasant movements (1861-94) in various districts of Assam. Even the waste land settlement rules introduced by the British since 1838 in Assam and in 1854 in Cachar, Nowgong greatly resented the people who were not practically given land rights except the right to cultivate the land on payment of high rate of land revenue. Just like India, economic nationalism also cropped up in Assam.

2. Trade and Commerce: The colonial character of British rule also reflected through the discriminatory commercial policy of the English in India. If we critically review the economic aspects of the two consecutive Charter Acts of 1813 and 1833 in relation to monopoly of trade, it would be obviously clear that the British made discrimination between the Indian and European traders. The British traders need not to pay anything to the government in running their business whereas the Indian traders and businessmen were compelled to pay taxes in running their business in their motherland. Such type of commercial discrimination led to the emergence of Trade Union movements in a later date against British colonialism.

3. Industry: Industrial policy was formulated by the British to satisfy their colonial economic interest. The British through the development of communication system in India specially the railway system, Indian raw materials were sent to England and out of those raw materials, machine made goods were sent to Indian markets. As a result, rural industry or cottage industry declined that led to the emergence of labour class people in India. These laborers had to work in British owned industries at a very low wages. Such a situation was also rampant in case of trade and industry even in Assam since 1793 when Assam –Bengal trade was going on. Gradually Assam was being rich in raw materials, large number of industries were established during British Raj in Assam. Subsequently traditional cottage industries of this region run by various communities of Assam failed to exist causing their economic sufferings.

b) Political Colonialism: The English East India Company tried to colonise India through imperialistic design enforcing expansionist policy like Subsidiary Alliance under Lord Wellesley and Doctrine of Lapse under Lord Dalhousie. Subsequently large numbers of territories were annexed by the company like Sind, Punjab, Satara, Jhansi, Nagpur, Udaipur etc. The British also annexed Lower Assam (1828), Upper Assam in 1838, Cachar in 1832, Khasi Hills in 1833, Jayantia Hills in 1835, NC Hills in 1854 etc.

(c) Socio-cultural colonialism: The English remoulded the social structure introducing modern and western education ignoring the traditional system of education. Social legislations were also made that greatly hampered the sentiments of the Indians as well as the people of Assam.

3. Colonialism through Divide and Rule Policy (1857-1909): After the Revolt of 1857, Queen's Proclamation and Govt. of India Act, 1858 was passed. The policy of annexation and expansion was stopped to consolidate their position but the policy of exploitation was indirectly going on more vigorously enforcing Divide and Rule policy to break down the unity of the Indians which was prevalent during Sepoy Mutiny among the Indians.

People were heavily taxed and the policy of economic exploitation continued unabated keeping colonial interest in mind. Many legitimate rights were confiscated though nominally few Indians were associated in conducting Indian administration. After the formation of INC in 1885, moderate politics based on prayer, protest and petition was going on that helped the British to enforce divide and rule policy. The partition of Bengal in 1905 under Lord Curzon was the best example of it. Of course, it was annulled in 1911. Success of Moderate period was being insignificant, Congress was divided into moderates and extremists in the Lahore Congress of

1907. Muslims were instigated who formed Muslim League in 1906. The Act of 1909 granted the provision of Separate Electorate to the Indian Muslims to colonise India.

4. Colonialism through Repression and atrocities (1909-1935): Peoples association was increased through the enactment of the Govt of India Acts, 1909, 1919 and 1935 which provided separate electorate, diarchy, provincial autonomy respectively. At the same time, the British under took repression and atrocities through Rowlatt Act of 1919, Jallianwallabagh Massacre, 1919 and sending Simon Commission (a white commission) in 1927 to India. Even the British followed repressive policy upon those who led Home Rule Movement in 1916 (under Annie Besant and B G Tilak), Non Cooperation Movement (1920-22) under Gandhiji, Swarajist Movement (1923-26) under C R Das and Motilal Nehru, Civil Disobedience Movement (1930-34) under Gandhiji in two stages. In spite of all these, people of Assam and of Cachar actively participated in the freedom movement of India through the formation of first Provincial Congress Committee in 1921 when Gandhiji visited Assam.

5. Period of Plans and Missions (1935-1947): A tremendous transformation had taken place in the last days of British colonialism. Second World war (1939-45) created an unstable situation. The spirit nationalism reached at a climax during Quit India Movement of 1942 through the slogan: "Do or Die." So the colonial government sent Cripps Mission (1942), Cabinet Mission (1946), formulated Wavell Plan and Mountbatten Plan (1947) to console the Indian minds. Lastly British compelled to leave India on 15th August, 1947 providing independence but it was divided into India and Pakistan. So, British colonialism and nationalistic feelings of the Indians during Clement Attlee led to the attainment of Independence in 1947. During this period, we find the reference of Grouping Plan, participation of congress leaders of both the valley of Assam in the freedom movement, Sylhet Referendum. Finally Assam as an invincible part of India, attained independence along with India shaking the British colonialism.

V. IMPACT OF COLONIALISM:

A. Economic Nationalism: All types of exploiting economic policy of the British led to the emergence of Economic Nationalism against British colonialism that can be summed up in the following heads:

1. Growth of agricultural labour class and emergence of Peasants and Labour Movements: British land settlements and the commercialization of agriculture led to the growth of agricultural labour who compelled to work in British industries at a very minimal labour wages. At a time, being reacted started peasants and labour movements against colonialism in various parts of the country. Mention may be made of Santhal uprising (1855), Phulaguri uprising (1861) of Nowgong, Patharughat (1893) of Darrang district, pabna and indigo revolt etc.

2. Growth of Capitalist Class: The British land revenue system and the maximization of the rate of land revenue compelled the peasants to borrow money from the British capitalists at a very maximized rate of interest.

3. Growth of Rural Indebtness: It was one of the most important results of British colonialism. The rural peasants compelled to borrow money from the British capitalists at a maximized rate of interest to protect their land as well as to perform their cultivation. Once entered the trapping of money lenders, could not come out from it causing rural indebtedness.

4. Commercialisation of Agriculture: The colonization process of the British reached at a climax through the commercialization of agriculture that indirectly made the peasants worst sufferers both in India and Assam.

5. British trade and industrial policy led to the economic drainage through the ruinage of cottage industries and growth of modern industries in British India.

6. Socially and educationally, Indians were kept backward without providing any facilities where there is no British colonial interest.

7. British colonialism also led to the growth of unemployment, communalism for Divide and Rule policy and the development of western education provided great incentives in arousing nationalism and finally Indians got independence on 15th August, 1947.

B. Political Nationalism: Politically Indians became conscious against the British. Indians as well as the people of Assam and of Cachar participated in the Sepoy mutiny in 1857. Not only this, they participated in the freedom movement through the formation of Indian National Congress in 1885.

C. Socio-Cultural Nationalism: Westernization process of British colonialism being ruined the original socio-cultural identity of the Indians, nationalism evolved in this dimension through the socio-religious reform movements like Brahma Samaj (1828), Arya Samaj, Aligarh Movement etc

VI. CONCLUSION:

British colonialism in India and Assam created national sentiments due to British exploitations and territorial expansions. It led to the growth of nationalism among the general masses who fought against British colonialism and finally succeeded in their mission through the attainment of independence in 1947.

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