

A Study of the Political Economics of the Indian Independence Movement

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Abstract: This paper aims to examine the catalysts and roots of the Indian Independence Movement (1857-1947) as well as several monumental social events that have helped this movements gain traction. Through an extensive review of the literature regarding the British Trading Presence, British Colonization Period, as well as several attempts at revolution that the Indian Independence Movement had before finally garnering worldwide attention and receiving extensive news coverage. Finally, this paper aims to analyze the long-term effects of the movement on Indian society.

Key words: Indian independence; Indian society; British colonization; social movements; Indian history

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1. Introduction

“My life is my message” are the words etched forever on the grandiose Statue De Gandhi, located in Geneva, Switzerland. As is common knowledge, Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi played an incredibly pivotal role in the Indian Independence struggle. This paper will examine the circumstances leading up to the eventual independence of India and the lasting effects that they held. The British presence in India, along with Gandhi, was one of the most influential factors in shaping modern India as it is now. One of the most integral parts of India’s history, their struggle for independence will most definitely be remembered as nothing but monumental.

2. Literature Review

2.1 India Under the British Raj

This section is devoted to discuss the influences and effects that Britain, as a European power, has had over pre-revolutionary India, which include the following sections: (1) the British trading presence in India during the 1700s, and (2) Great Britain’s grasp on the Indian economy.

2.2 The British Trading Presence

The British trading presence in India during the 1700s definitely had a critical role in shaping the early stages of the Indian Independence Movement. By the 16th century, the British had traded with India for over a century. During the first half of Britain’s colonization in India, they were merely a trading presence. Over the course of a century, British trade was almost built entirely upon India’s market (Marshall). The East India Company, well known as “The Company”, was a commercial enterprise led by a group of London merchants that first settled in

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India in the year 1600 (Schwartzberg). Around this time, Bengal was viewed as a significant source of supplies (Lochan). Writes Professor Peter Marshall in *The British Presence in India in the 18th Century*, “Towards the end of the 17th century, India had become the focal point of the Company’s trade” (Marshall). It is evident that India’s position in Britain’s trade was one that was both influential and crucial. The Company’s initial goal was to trade horses, bullion, and coffee with porcelain, and cotton silk and textiles from China and India. Trading between the two parties remained constant for a century (Lochan). This halted in the late 18th century as historian Rajiv Lochan notes, “The Company was now sourcing most of its requirements from China and other Asian countries.” (Lochan). We can gather that the East India Company shifted their attention away from India due to other sources in Asia emerging. The British then started to gradually involve themselves in Indian politics during the 1750s, most likely as a result of India’s unstable government and the aggressiveness of the British (Marshall). The death of Aurangzeb in 1707 marked the end of the Mughal Dynasty and the beginning of modern India, and the nation was no longer under a monarchy (Aggarwal). Due to the split of the Mughal Empire, there were many cities that replaced it. However, India managed to maintain a stable rule, and it did not “produce a situation of anarchy and chaos, as used once to be assumed”, BBC states (Marshall). As one can see, the British presence in India was progressively becoming stronger. Slowly gaining control of the fragile empire, it is quite evident that India’s colonization was one that was predetermined from the start.

2.3 British Colonization

As time passed, Great Britain’s grasp on India tightened with it. Throughout the late 1800s and early 1900s, a large majority of the laws in India were made by the British; it had to be passed through the British Empire for it to be ratified. The British, in a way, encouraged the concept of discrimination- as Kallie Szczepanski, New York Times correspondent, remarks, “The British also created “divide and rule” policies, putting Hindu and Muslim Indians against one another” (Szczepanski). This affirms the notion that the British Colonization had a profound effect on religion in India. Other effects of Britain’s tightening rule were especially prominent in all-white settings. A prime example of this is when civil activist leader Mahatma Gandhi faced racial discrimination on a train. Gandhi was forced out of a carriage and called derogatory names after refusing to give up his first class seat which was specially reserved for whites. Additionally, Indians were limited to certain jobs, couldn’t walk on paved sidewalks, and faced many hardships that almost exactly mirror those of African-Americans in the U.S. during the 20th century (Meltzer 14). It is conclusive that the British had trampled on the Indian population’s basic human rights, resulting in them adopting a rather tyrannous way of governing the nation.

3. India’s Rebellion

3.1 Attempts at Independence

As the Indian peoples started to take notice of the tyrannical and monopolistic ways of the British, it was only a matter of time until waves of social unrest would rock the social fabric of India and eventually shatter the nation’s century-long relationship with the British. In this section, I focus on how decades-long rule under the British Raj eventually led to a rip in the carefully repressed social fabric of India.

3.1.2 Catalysts to Revolution

As can be seen throughout history, with a superior party comes rebellion. Inevitably, India’s state of exasperation grew as Britain’s grasp on India secured. The first rebellion, the Indian Mutiny, against the British Empire occurred during 1857 and 1858 and lasted about 18 months. Historians state that this may have rooted

from a variety of reasons, one being the pace at which India was getting Westernized (Living). As Encyclopædia Britannica states, “The introduction of Western methods of education was a direct challenge to orthodoxy, both Hindu and Muslim” (Nanda). We can ascertain that religion was something that was highly regarded in India at the time, for if challenged, could start a rebellion. Towards the end of 1858, the British overcame the Indians. The Indian loss that resulted from it was most likely a result of many reasons external such as lack of organization. The Indian side was also disunited, which further weakened the movement. This failed rebellion caused mistrust and hatred between the British and Indians and further aggravated the British Empire (Living). The Indian Mutiny marked the first of a multitude of protests that would eventually change the Indian social structure and culture.

3.2 The Impact of British Rule

There are numerous debates concerning whether British rule benefited the Indian Empire; India’s immense population and early economic development make this topic one that is very complex. Supporters of British rule claim that the economic development and changes in the legal and administrative system could not have been achieved without the British (Living). *Living in the British Empire: India* provides an interesting take on this: “...all of these benefits went to a tiny British ruling class and the majority of Indians gained little.” (Living). This evidence counter argues the claim, giving us insight into the reality of these so-called “benefits”. In “*Social and Economic Impact of British Rule in India*”, Mamta Aggarwal argues,

Western education, however, influenced Indian society in a way that the British could never have imagined. Theories of philosophers like John Locke, Jeremy Bentham, Adam Smith and Voltaire instilled in the Indian mind notions of freedom, liberty, equality and democracy. As a result of the exposure to such ideas, Indians began to recognise the need for change (Aggarwal).

As emphasized above, British colonization clearly did produce revolutionary results. Whether the Indian Empire gained or lost from British rule is a matter of perception, but it can be concluded that the British have had a significant effect on Indian society.

4. The Pivotal Dandi March

4.1 Objectives of the Salt March

The Dandi March, otherwise known as the Salt Satyagraha, was built on the belief of nationwide unity. Due to Britain's ratification of the salt tax, salt production and distribution in India was controlled by the British. Independently producing and distributing salt was banned by the British government. The Indian population instead had to buy imported salt in which the British imposed expensive taxes (Indian National Congress). It is appropriate to introduce the protagonist of this movement during this period, activist Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, who used non-violent protesting as his main tactic. Gandhi’s choice of targeting the salt tax initially received many negative responses, even from his allies. However, Gandhiji understood that India could be united under rallying against a simple symbol-salt (Szczepanski). In other words, as stated in *Gandhi’s Historic March to the Sea in 1930*, “He [Gandhi] understood that the salt tax impacted every person in India directly, whether they were Hindu, Muslim or Sikh, and was more easily understood than complex questions of constitutional law or land tenure.” (Szczepanski). This quote highlights the objectives of Gandhi’s salt march, and how they pertained to India as a whole. Regardless of sex or religion, which were highly controversial topics at the time, Indians could march under a single goal — which in my opinion was key to the widespread support that he would receive

later on. Therefore the positive changes in societal structure, as well as religious prejudice, following the 240-mile journey are unsurprising.

4.2 The Aftermath of the March

Gandhi's historical Dandi March was a turning point in India's struggle for independence. It served as a crucial factor in further popularizing the Civil Disobedience Act; the amount of support and news coverage the protest received was unprecedented (Szczepanski). Gandhi's then-new principle of non-violent protesting went on to catch the eyes of many civil-rights activists such as Martin Luther King Jr. and Nelson Mandela (Malhotra). Said Nelson Mandela, "Gandhi's ideas have played a vital role in South Africa's transformation and with the help of Gandhi's teaching, apartheid has been overcome." (Malhotra). This quote makes clear that Gandhi's principles have had global influence, garnering the attention of noteworthy figures. Furthermore, Salt Satyagraha, otherwise known as Dandi March opened the doors for many women; it enabled them to participate in the nationalist movement, or any movement in that case, for the first time in Indian history (Dandi). In brief, the satyagraha was quite a monumental event as its worldwide impact was one that was unparalleled in the history of India.

As a result of Gandhiji's monumental salt satyagraha, a domino effect rippled throughout India. Influential leaders such as **C. Rajagopalachari** and **Jawaharlal Nehru** started advocating against the repressive taxes imposed on salt in Bengal, Andhra, and many other cities (Dandi). The Indian National Congress states, "Jawaharlal Nehru's arrest on 14th April 1930, for defiance of salt laws, led to massive protest and demonstration in all major cities at that time." (Dandi). This very clearly shows that there was massive public support for deduction of the tax that followed the march. This march contributed greatly to national independence for India- it would be the first of many movements that followed. Not only did the salt satyagraha introduce India to many prominent figures of the Civil Disobedience Act, but it incited positive changes that have influenced present-day India greatly.

5. Conclusion

As expressed, colonial rule in India had many aspects that were oppressive and unjust, but for it not to have happened, the socio-economic developments in India would most definitely not have occurred. All things considered, it is safe to say that British rule has affected India greatly — whether positively or negatively depends on the individual — and have shaped various aspects of India. The British presence brought about significant leaders whose ideas and principles have and will still continue to influence the modern world.

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Glossary

Bengal: an Indian sub-continent, modern-day Bangladesh

Satyagraha: a policy of peaceful political resistance

Civil Disobedience Act: a movement created by the Indian National Congress with the goal of gaining independence from the British.

C. Rajagopalachari: also known as Rajaji or C.R., Rajagopalachari was the Governor-General of India from June 21, 1948 to January 26, 1950.

Jawaharlal Nehru: Nehru was a freedom fighter and would become the first Prime Minister of India after it was declared an independent nation.

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