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The Impact of Colonialism on Indian Economy and Society: A Historical Perspective

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ABSTRACT: British colonial rule in India from the mid-18th century to 1947 brought profound transformations across economic, social, and cultural domains. It witnessed the decline of traditional industries, exploitation of agrarian communities, reinforcement of social hierarchies, and cultural renaissance amidst colonial imposition. Despite post-independence efforts to address colonial legacies, India grapples with enduring economic, social, and cultural ramifications.

KEYWORDS: Colonialism, Transformation, British colonial

I. INTRODUCTION

The British colonial rule in India (**Rajan, 1969**), spanning from the mid-18th century until independence in 1947, wrought profound transformations across economic, social, and cultural spheres. Witnessing the decline of traditional industries, exploitation of agrarian communities through revenue systems, and the reinforcement of social hierarchies, colonial policies primarily served British interests, exacerbating poverty and inequality. Despite some infrastructure developments and social reforms, the legacy of colonialism left deep imprints on India's economic patterns, social fabric, and cultural identity, shaping its post-independence trajectory. India continues to grapple with the ramifications of colonial rule while striving to address historical injustices and forge a path towards inclusive development and cultural resurgence.

II. REVIEW

Gupta, C. (2010) Gupta's article adeptly deconstructs the colonial construction of Dalit masculinity in Uttar Pradesh, shedding light on its social and discursive dimensions. Through nuanced analysis, it exposes the nexus between caste, masculinity, and colonial power dynamics, highlighting the marginalization and institutional decimation faced by Dalit males. Gupta's exploration of Dalit assertions of masculinity within a historical framework adds depth to our understanding of gendered identities in colonial India.

Akyeampong, E., & Fofack, H. (2012) Akyeampong and Fofack's paper meticulously traces the economic marginalization of women in Sub-Saharan Africa from pre-colonial times to the end of colonial rule. By intertwining historical processes with economic analysis, it elucidates how colonial policies entrenched patriarchy and exacerbated the exploitation of female labor. The paper's comprehensive examination underscores the enduring impact of historical injustices on post-colonial economies, offering valuable insights for policymakers and scholars alike.

Bhattacharyya, S. (2012) Bhattacharyya's study provides a critical perspective on India's economic progress, highlighting the persistent gap in living standards despite decades of growth. Through empirical analysis, it underscores the limited impact of economic growth on reducing disparities between India and developed nations. Bhattacharyya's work prompts reflection on the structural impediments to inclusive development and calls for a more nuanced understanding of India's economic trajectory amidst global comparisons.

Manjunath, G. R. (2014) Manjunath's analysis offers a mixed assessment of British colonial rule in India, acknowledging both its detrimental and transformative impacts on Indian society. By examining economic, social, and cultural dimensions, the chapter provides a nuanced portrayal of colonial legacies, acknowledging intellectual advancements alongside economic exploitation. Manjunath's exploration contributes to a comprehensive understanding of the complexities surrounding colonialism's legacy in India.

Giovas, C. M., & Fitzpatrick, S. M. (2014) Giovas and Fitzpatrick's study introduces a novel approach to understanding prehistoric Caribbean colonization, employing behavioral ecology models to illuminate migration patterns. Through meticulous analysis, it elucidates how environmental factors shaped settlement strategies in the



Caribbean, offering new insights into ancient human behavior. Despite some inconsistencies, the study enriches archaeological discourse by bridging theoretical frameworks with empirical evidence.

Broadberry, S., & Gupta, B. (2015) Broadberry and Gupta's chapter provides a comprehensive historical overview of India's economic performance, spanning four centuries. By analyzing long-term trends in living standards and GDP per capita, it contextualizes India's development within the framework of the Great Divergence. The chapter's meticulous examination sheds light on the evolving dynamics of Indian economy, facilitating a deeper understanding of colonial and post-colonial economic trajectories.

III. DURATION AND SCOPE OF BRITISH COLONIAL RULE

The British colonial rule in India (**Kolsky, 2015**), lasting from the mid-18th century until 1947, was a period marked by profound transformation and control. The British East India Company initially established its foothold through trade and military conquest, gradually extending its influence over large parts of the subcontinent. The pivotal Battle of Plassey in 1757 and the subsequent Battle of Buxar in 1764 cemented British dominance, leading to the consolidation of power. By the mid-19th century, following the Indian Rebellion of 1857, the British Crown assumed direct control, ushering in the era of the British Raj. This period saw the establishment of a centralized administrative system, extensive infrastructure development like railways and telegraphs, and the integration of the Indian economy into the global market primarily for British benefit. The colonial state imposed new legal and educational systems, which, while modernizing certain aspects of Indian society, also entrenched social divisions and economic exploitation. The British rule profoundly altered India's political, economic, and social landscape, setting the stage for the rise of Indian nationalism. This movement ultimately led to India's independence in 1947, ending nearly two centuries of British dominance.

IV. ECONOMIC TRANSFORMATION

British colonial rule brought significant economic transformation to India, marked by both structural changes and exploitation. Prior to colonial dominance, India was a thriving economy with a robust textile industry and rich agricultural base. However, British policies led to deindustrialization, particularly in the textile sector, as Indian markets were flooded with cheap, mass-produced British goods, leading to the collapse of local crafts and industries. The colonial administration imposed high land revenue systems, such as the Permanent Settlement, Ryotwari, and Mahalwari, which burdened Indian peasants and zamindars with heavy taxes, often leading to widespread indebtedness and land dispossession.

The focus shifted from subsistence farming to the cultivation of cash crops like cotton, indigo, and opium, making the economy vulnerable to global market fluctuations and causing frequent famines. The British also extracted wealth through what was termed the "economic drain," transferring vast sums of India's resources to Britain through trade imbalances, high taxes, and repatriation of profits. Infrastructure developments, like railways and ports, were primarily designed to facilitate resource extraction and export. While these changes integrated India into the global economy, they did so at the expense of local economic stability and growth, laying the groundwork for persistent economic challenges post-independence.

V. SOCIAL HIERARCHIES AND STRATIFICATION

British colonial rule significantly reinforced and restructured social hierarchies and stratification in India. The British codified the caste system to maintain control, relying heavily on upper-caste elites for governance, which deepened social divisions and discrimination against lower castes and marginalized communities. The introduction of Western education created a new class of English-speaking elites, widening the social gap between urban and rural populations. British policies favored landlords and zamindars, further marginalizing the peasantry and entrenching rural inequalities. Although the British introduced social reforms like the abolition of sati and promotion of widow remarriage, these efforts had limited reach and impact. Additionally, the manipulation of religious and communal identities exacerbated divisions, sowing seeds for future conflicts. The social hierarchies and stratification solidified during colonial rule continued to influence India's social dynamics and challenges long after independence.

VI. CULTURAL AND IDENTITY CHANGES

British colonial rule catalyzed significant cultural and identity changes (**MacKinnon, 2002**) in India, notably through the imposition of English language and education, which fostered a new class of Western-educated elites and facilitated the rise of Indian nationalism. While this period witnessed a decline in traditional Indian education systems and arts, it



also sparked a cultural renaissance blending Eastern and Western philosophies, led by figures like Rabindranath Tagore and Swami Vivekananda. Despite efforts to document and categorize Indian society along colonial lines, nationalist leaders utilized these cultural shifts to forge a collective identity and resist colonial rule. The synthesis of Western and Indian ideas during this period continues to shape India's cultural identity, blending traditional heritage with contemporary influences, and impacting its post-independence trajectory and global cultural presence.

VII. POST-COLONIAL LEGACY

The post-colonial legacy of British rule in India is multifaceted, shaping the nation's political, economic, social, and cultural landscape long after independence. Economically, India inherited a legacy of infrastructure developments and industrialization, yet also grappled with persistent inequalities and the repercussions of exploitative colonial policies. Socially, the caste system and communal divisions entrenched during colonial rule continue to influence social dynamics and challenges. Culturally, the fusion of Western and Indian ideas cultivated during the colonial period persists, shaping India's cultural identity and global influence. Politically, the struggle for independence and the subsequent partition left lasting scars, impacting inter-community relations and regional politics. The post-colonial era has been marked by efforts to address the legacies of colonialism while forging a distinct national identity and navigating the complexities of a diverse and rapidly changing society.

VIII. CONCLUSION

The enduring legacy of British colonial rule in India encompasses economic exploitation, social stratification, and cultural transformation. While infrastructure developments and social reforms occurred, they primarily served colonial interests, leaving deep imprints on India's post-independence trajectory. Efforts to address these legacies persist amidst India's quest for inclusive development and cultural resurgence.

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