

CHAPTER II
THE NATURE OF BRITISH RULE

Introduction

We have been describing the character of society in pre-British Gujarat. At the end of the 18th century and in the early decades of the 19th century as a result of political domination, this society came in vital contact with a society which was entirely different in social and ideological structures. In order to understand the influence of the new forces generated ^{on society} as a result of this, it is essential to know the chief features of the new political rule. In this chapter we will examine the following points:-

- I. Economic background of the new rulers in the 19th century.
- II. The Prevalent ideology in 19th Century Britain.
- III. The reaction to the new rule.
- IV. Concluding remarks.

I

ECONOMIC BACKGROUND OF THE NEW RULERS IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

"A new epoch in the history of India may be said to have begun in 1498, when Vasco da Gama's three little ships cast anchor off Calicut."¹

A still more significant event in the history of India and Gujarat occurred when "on the last day of the sixteenth century a Royal Charter was issued by Queen Elizabeth granting to George, Earl of Cumberland, and two hundred and fifteen Knights, Aldermen and Merchants the exclusive liberty of trading in the East Indian Seas for fifteen years, and a promise of renewal of the same term, if the institution should be found profitable to the Crown and realm."² Since that historical event, Indian and

Gujarati society began to feel the impact of Western Society. It may however be mentioned that India and Gujarat experienced a far-reaching impact only after the first decades of the 19th century, when Britain acquired political domination over the country.*

Before we examine the changes introduced by British rule, it would be pertinent to know the nature and type of society which the British represented. India had numerous experiences of foreign political attacks and domination prior to British rule.³ Indian and Gujarati society was affected in various ways by these invasions. It should however be noted that prior to British rule, the nature of political contact of India with other countries was by and large a juxtaposition between two pre-industrial societies. The contact between Britain of the 19th century, and India was that of between a growing industrial country and a pre-industrial one. Hence the juxtaposition of two societies at different levels of development generated entirely new situations. In order to understand the nature of the consequences as a result of this unique event, it is vital to know the nature of the economic needs of Britain in the period under review.

When the East India Company secured a charter to trade with India, the main object of the company was to carry on trading activities, just

*When the East India Company acquired the Diwani of Bengal in 1757, the British domination over India was inaugurated. In Gujarat, the first contact occurred in 1612, when Surat became the principal station of the Company in the East. Of course, political influence of Britain was wielded only from 1759, when the Company shared certain amount of political authority with the Nawab of Surat. By 1820, in India, the British rulers had acquired considerable territory and therefore significance of the new rule was felt thereafter. (Thornton - A Summary of the History of East India Company, 1833, p.1; also refer Desai, G.H., Gujaratno Arvachin Itihas, 1898, p. 352.)

as it was done by the representatives of other countries.^{4*} The economy of England at that period centred round the needs of trade and commerce and therefore the aim of the East India Company was not to search out for markets for its commodities, but to reap rich profits by securing monopoly in trade.⁵

However, a qualitative change at the end of the 18th century and beginning of the 19th century occurred when, as a result of various inventions, the Industrial Revolution occurred in England. Consequently, she began to pull ahead in economic production and ultimately came out triumphant as a nation of "shopkeepers of the world." The economic needs of the new England were entirely different. Rapidly mounting products of the new manufactures required an outlet, comparative ~~px~~ free-market, and raw materials to produce commodities. In such a situation, India which was formerly a country exporting commodities, became the supplier of raw materials for the growing industries of England. Britain, under the ideological influence of Adam Smith⁶ entered into the era of free-trade, and therefore in 1813, when the Charter of the East India Company was renewed, the monopoly of Indian trade for the Company was abolished, and India became a free market for exporting finished goods of the British factories.⁷ India, under the new circumstances was required to be a

*Here it may be pointed out that we are not entering into controversial issues such as whether the conquest of India by Britain was an accidental phenomenon or whether it was pre-planned. Further we are also not discussing the controversial point whether India had reached the point of departure in economic transformation even prior to the British rule. (For discussion on the above mentioned topics refer to works such as Keith, Constitutional History of India, 1600-1935, Masani, R.P., Britain in India, Mukerjee, Ramkrishna, The Rise and Fall of the East India Company, Jha, S.C., Development of Capitalism in India).

colonial adjunct of the British Empire. In short, India and Gujarat in the 19th century came under the vital impact of Britain which had already entered a new phase of its development. This feature had a far-reaching influence on social life of India and Gujarat.

II

THE PREVALENT IDEOLOGY IN 19TH CENTURY BRITAIN

In England from the period of Reformation, a slow revolution in ideas was taking place.⁸ By the end of 18th century "slowly but, nevertheless, irresistably, science replaced religion as the controlling factor in giving shape to the thoughts of men. The idea of a golden age in the past, with its concomitant idea of original sin, gave way to the doctrine of progress, with its own idea of perfectibility through reason. The idea of social initiative and social control surrendered to the idea of individual initiative and individual control."⁹ This new philosophy is well-known as liberalism. During the early 19th century in England struggle for introducing liberal reforms in various aspects of life was gaining strength. As Bearce points out, "Analytically one might describe the Liberalism of the Reform Bill period as a combination of laissez faire economics, a utilitarian regard for good laws and administration and a middle class concern with representative government and civil liberties."¹⁰

During the 19th century, Britain was passing through a phase when the liberal ideas of Adam Smith, Jeremy Bentham, Thomas Paine and J.S. Mill were nourishing the British intellectuals. It was the same period when Europe was under the influence of thinkers such as Voltaire, Rousseau, Helvetius and Diderot.

The main tenets of liberal thought were the worth of individual and the protection of his personality, freedom of speech, thought and

association, tolerance, the disassociation of religion from politics, a secular approach to social and political issues and an abiding faith in man's capacity to progress.¹¹ In actual life these principles took the form of rights, through which they could be realised. According to Hobhouse rights of personal liberty, social liberty, economic liberty, domestic liberty, and political liberty were some of the important rights among these.¹²

We now briefly describe the new liberal values as reflected in

(i) respect for individuality, (ii) rationality and (iii) democracy.

i) Respect for individuality: The main idea behind this principle is that the individual should be given all opportunities for developing his personality. But if this is absent, then John Stuart Mill says, "there is wanting one of the principal ingredients of human happiness and quite the chief ingredient of individual and social progress."¹³

The tenet of individuality can only thrive in a society in which "little respect is paid to tradition or authority. It is as far removed as possible from that primitive type of social organization where the overpowering dominance of tribal custom and tradition leaves little scope for individual initiative and concern...More positively, an individualistic society is one where people 'think for themselves' and are regarded as being the best judges of their own interests..It is a society where the movement "from status to contract" which Maine required as the mark of a progressive society has gone a long way."¹⁴

In fact Laski remarks that the essence of the liberal doctrine is "the emancipation of the individual."¹⁵ This respect for the personality of the individual has various aspects, such as equality of all human beings, right of individual to have freedom of thought, discussion and action and tolerance of others' view points. It was this spirit of individuality

that led various persons to fight against social disabilities and struggle for emanicipation of women. It was in this atmosphere that Mill vehemently advocated for equality of women and declared that "Workmen need other protection than that of their employers, and women other protection than that of their men."¹⁶

In the background of these values, problems such as which occupation to choose, or whom to marry and when to marry, which political party to side with, which religion to follow or whether to believe in religion or not, were all gradually becoming individual affairs.

In short individual who was not taken into consideration as a personality during the pre-modern phase acquired not only significance but became a pivot round which all activities moved.

ii) Rationalism: The second important aspect of the liberal value system is rationalism. Reason becomes the sole principle for guiding action. Institutions or ideas which could not bear the test of reason were not to be accepted. Nothing was accepted on faith. In fact, "in the realm of practice it (rationalism) seeks in various ways to grapple with the elements of chance and fate in individual and social life by combating the instinctive in man and submitting to criticism everything in social life bearing the character of mere custom and tradition and recalcitrant to generalizing rational reflection."¹⁷ There prevails, & generally, a confidence with regard to arriving at a rational judgement, and achieving a rational regulation of individual and social life through the aid of reason.

As an aspect of rational attitude, individual's practice in a particular field would not be determined, because ^{of} the declarations of the religious texts, or because of traditional prescriptions, or because

of the elders' wishes, but because its inherent validity secures for the free consent of the individual. Underlying the rational attitude lies the right to challenge authority, whosoever it may be. It really implies authority of the that the head of the family, or of religious group, or of state could be challenged by an individual.

With rationalism also come the trust in the ability of human intellect to solve human problems. This confidence in the moulding of future inculcated firm belief in the idea of progress.

iii) Faith in democratic forms of government: Liberalism which has a high regard for the freedom of the individual, lends a very strong support to democracy. Thomas Paine, the great exponent of liberal thought says,

"Every citizen is a member of the sovereignty, and as such, can acknowledge no personal subjection, and his obedience can be only to the laws."¹⁸

Therefore the ideally best form of government is "that in which the sovereignty of supreme controlling power in the last resort, is vested in the entire aggregate of the community."¹⁹ Hence it was said that "The right of rights is the right of having a share in the making of laws, to which the good of the whole makes it his duty to submit."²⁰ The great political struggles and social revolutions of the 18th century and of the 19th century were the struggles to establish the democratic form of government.

In fine, it may be said that the liberal values constituted the core of culture of British nation, when Britain extended its dominion over India.

III

REACTION TO THE NEW SYSTEM IN INDIA AND GUJARAT

The intelligentsia in India and Gujarat which was primarily nourished in English language and English literature in the first half of the 19th century naturally came under the influence of the new economy and new value system. For intelligentsia, Europe in the 19th century was passing through the phase of "the supreme reign of laissez faire and individualism. Individual liberty and freedom became the centre of their doctrine. It is also the age when new womanhood emerged as a result partially of Mill's advocacy, partially as a result of new industry which opened a new scope and partially due to free education."²¹ Sir N.J. England of Chandavarkar described that period as follows: "It was an age of splendour when humanity seemed to stand at the start of a quickened life with promise of a bright future for modern civilization. In politics it was the age of reform bills, of free trade, of the abolition of slavery, of statesmen of towering personalities like Palmerston, Peel, Gladstone, Disraeli, Cobden, Bright, Clarkson and Wilberforce. In social reforms it was the age of emancipation of women, of Elizabeth Fry, and Florence Nightingale. In literature which for the period reflects its currents and characters and the ideals of the people, it was the age of Wordsworth, Tennyson and Browning reflecting through them the mighty hopes that make us men."²²

In Gujarat also literateurs and social thinkers like poet Dalpatram, Poet Narmad, Navalram, Karsandas, Narsinhrao Divetia and others appreciated the distinctness of the new political rulers. These enlightened individuals in their various writings recognized the power of the new economy and eulogised the glory of a new liberal ideology.²³

The enlightened intellectuals having imbibed the ideas of rationality, liberty, equality and progress, made efforts to view the extant society through the new lenses. This group of persons were known as reformers (Sudhārāwālā). Navalram describes reformism thus: "To realise that deformities have crept in our morals and customs and to further realise that without eradicating them, there cannot be any progress in society, and to act accordingly is reformism."²⁴ Of course it may be mentioned that only reform in the early 19th century meant only social reform.²⁵ The reformers of Gujarat examined the social structure from new angles, and wherever they found discrepancies, advocated repair or renovation. Further in introducing changes in society the reformers applied various methods such as exposure, and propaganda through literature, press, platform and associations. They also made appeals to the government to enact such legislations as to remove certain of the social evils.*

In the second half of the 19th century, when economic and political discriminations between British and Indian interests became more acute, the connotation of the word reform was widened. It included economic reforms in which the enlightened individuals pleaded for introducing machine production, starting of joint-stock companies and for boosting up of indigenous industries till the local production rate reached the level of foreign production.*

The word reform further meant political reform. Right to participate in law-making, to criticise and expose government measures and to contest for higher administrative services was gaining preeminence in the latter half of the 19th century.*

*Detailed discussion on all these aspects has been attempted in the chapters that follow.

In the second half of the 19th century, there emerged a new group of thinkers popularly known as the Revivalists. These thinkers had experienced the breezes of new education. They were familiar with the liberal ideology. These thinkers had immense confidence in the strength of ancient traditions and institutions. They believed that if efforts were made to revive those conditions which according to them were ideal, all the evils of the extant society would be eradicated. Manilal Nabhoobhai, the veteran revivalist, explains the position of the revivalists. He says that revivalists, "do not consider the extant social structure as heaven...But the real difference between the two schools of thought is with regard to the methods to be adopted in improving society...They (the revivalists) feel that ancient principles were the ideal."²⁶

We will not go into the ~~deai~~ details of the approach of the revivalists. We will only mention that the important aspect of the second school of thought was that though they differed in methods and in the content of social change, they predominantly adopted a rational approach. Whenever they advocated the revival of the old institutions or customs, they tried to prove the case on rational grounds, and did not resort to the approach that because the religious authorities have prescribed, we must abide by those customs.²⁷ We may here refer to another difference between the approach of reformers and of revivalists. The revivalists were vehemently opposed to the interference of foreign government in social matters. They believed that reform should ~~in~~ come from within.²⁸

Thus the two groups of enlightened individuals that came under the influence of new education, and new ideology, reacted in two different ways. The outstanding representatives of social reform school were

Durgaram Mehtaji, Dalpatram, Narmadashankar*, Karsandas, Mahipatram and Navalram, while Manilal Nabhoobhai, Govardhanram Tripathi, Ichharam Desai, and D.B. Ambalal Desai were some of the outstanding representatives of the revivalist school.

IV

CONCLUDING REMARKS

As observed earlier in this chapter, the British rulers though representing a new economy and a new ideology, were alien for Indians, and further as their primary attitude to India was as a subordinate colony, the impact of these new forces was limited and distorted. As we will be discussing in detail, these aspects in our subsequent chapters, we will mention here briefly the dichotomy revealed in the British policy in Britain and in British policy in India.

The introduction of new economy, for instance, did not lead to industrialization of India but it made her a raw material producing territory. Further the laissez faire policy which was advantageous for British interests was disastrous for the Indian economy. Charles Grant, one of the important personalities in the East India Company, remarked thus about the British economic policy in 1822: "If India were a separate state, governed by an independent ruler, he would not submit to this inequality; he would establish protective or countervailing duties on behalf of the manufactures of his own territories."²⁹ Sardar Panikkar while reviewing the nature of liberalism in India remarks: "There was one aspect of British liberal thought which from the beginning, Indians refused to accept and that was free trade. It was clear to Indian political

*It may be pointed out here that in his last years (i.e. from 1879-1886) he left the camp of reformers and became a vehement protagonist of revivalism.

leaders that free trade which British liberalism elevated to the position of an economic dogma was no more than a translation into general terms of Britain's industrial and economic interests."³⁰

Similarly in matters of applications of liberal ideals, two different principles were being evolved. Enlightened rulers like Munro and Elphinstone on the whole made efforts to apply liberal tenets to Indian conditions. They further visualised, as a result of these ideas, the gradual awakening in the people which one day may make it inevitable for the natives to get more extended notions and "they will expect first a share of their own government and then the whole."³¹ But these representatives of British rule were not afraid of this consequence because they believed in Westernization of the way of life of Indians, the enjoyment of liberty and the practice of constitutional government as the ultimate goal of India's transformation.³²

However the majority of the ruling class thinkers were not for application of liberal principles in toto. James Mill who was the ardent liberal thinker while discussing about the possibility of western political institutions in India, remarked that "the stage of civilization and the moral and political situation in which the people of India are placed, render the establishment of legislative assemblies impracticable. A simple form of arbitrary government tempered by European honour and European intelligence, is the only form which is now fit for Hindustan."³³ In fact when in 1861 in the New Councils, Indians were to be nominated, "Sir Bartle Frere indicated what the proposed councils were intended to be when he likened the functions of the councils to those of the durbar of an Indian prince - merely a channel through which the ruler might learn how the measures he proposed to take were likely to affect his subjects, so that he might have an inkling of discontent before it became disaffection."³⁴

It is because of this dual approach that the initial enthusiasm towards the British rule led to caution in appraising the role of the new rulers.³⁵ It is because of this that Philip Woodruff remarks, that "the awakening of India's spirit which took place in the nineteenth century will have to be assessed carefully and a balance struck. In the one scale will be weighted all the best that India acquired from contact with England - a liberal and rational approach to human institutions, a sense of the individual's value and yet of his duty to the state; in the other scale must come the lack of self-confidence bred by alien rule, the lack of realism encouraged by an alien educational system, the instinct to resist even a reasonable suggestion because it came from the patronizing superior West."³⁶

In the pages that follow we will be elaborating upon the various aspects of social change in Gujarati society in the 19th century as a result of the impact with Britain, and evaluate the significance of the contact.

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