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Discussion #1 Final Notes

1. Though Indian disunity contributed to enabling British colonial rule in India, it is by no means the only factor. Metcalf says on pgs 53/4 that the EIC's sudden embarkation for conquest is merely circumstances aligning, and perhaps it is, but what circumstances are we to be attributing British colonial rule to? I would say that process of becoming decentralized after a period of relatively stable centralization (Mughals) and the subsequent chaos and uncertainty that comes with such a process as well as Indian familiarity and acceptance of European presence in the subcontinent allowed the British to insert themselves into Indian politics as just another regional authority grabbing hold of power and in turn spreading a centralizing influence (going back to the pattern of decentralization/centralization throughout Indian history).

Evidence:

Pg 23/24: There was an accelerating decentralization after Aurangzeb's death in 1707. Challenges came from "social groups with old names but new cohesion and status" thanks mostly in part to the Mughals. So even as the Mughal Empire weakens as these new regional powers assert challenges, the regions themselves are gaining cohesiveness (push and pull btwn centralization/decentralization pattern).

Pg 32-34: There was a Sikh revolt led by Banda Bahadur that was a great challenge to Aurangzeb's successor, followed by various raids on Punjab and Delhi and experienced devastating blows, felt chaos and disorder. Pg 44: Collapse of authority in Northern India and once the Marathas take control, they too split into four different, increasingly separate states. It is this sort of spiraling decentralization and uncertain and insecure atmosphere that left a power gap for someone to fill, and since none of the regional states were getting an upper hand quick enough, the British (and indeed other European powers) were now thought of "as part of the shifting array of powerholders" local to India and were in a position to take charge (pg 50).

Pg 47: Indian merchants flocked to British fortified cities during unrest looking for security towards their persons and property. Since the British did have a small foothold in the subcontinent, their stability was sought after during the shaky decentralized period of uncertainty and further exemplified the position of a local authority the British had over "their" small presidencies and the gap of the position for the centralized power in India.

Pg 24: "English and Dutch trading companies further established themselves in coastal enclaves during the seventeenth century." Europeans had been trading with the subcontinent from the 1600s, so by the mid-eighteenth century and nineteenth century when the EIC gained control of India, they were already a well-established "power" of sorts for over a century.

Pg 37: Europeans even trained infantrymen and sometimes led soldiers for various regional states. There was a certain amount of openness that the Indians had for the Europeans due to the

aforementioned familiarity, profitable trade relationship (pg 45), and it is these things, along with a certain “accessibility and flourishing economy” (pg 55) that led to such deep British ingratiating and penetration of India and allow them to take colonial control.

2. The British acquisition of India after the revelation that political rule was very profitable after gaining Diwani was not an accident. It was through the lens of greed and economic gains that motivated the British to expand their political rule from Bengal to the rest of the subcontinent, which they did through deliberate measures like military conquest (particularly with Lord Wellesley) and subsidiary alliances (like Awadh), not to mention economic policies that try to implement long lasting measures (after an initial application of simply squeezing tax revenue from the peasants) with the idea of the “improving English landlord”.

Evidence:

The EIC had always been driven by the idea of gains and monetary profits. Pg 51, They abused trading rights (one of the leading factors to the Battle of Plassey). And with the payoffs gained from that ‘battle’, “appetite for wealth and power whetted, would accept no constraints” (53), which led to the Battle of Buxar and Diwani, which showed the British how profitable ruling could be.

Pg 77/8 After initial practices of collecting tax revenue from their district that exacerbated a famine and led to negatively impacting future crops, the EIC shifted to economic policies that they meant for the Indians to use as incentive/motivation to improve the land (and therefore improving the tax collection) with the Permanent Settlement and the ryotwari following the idea of the “improving English landlord”, this change in economic policies from immediate monetary fulfillment to trying to help the cultivators for a better tomorrow shows a more long-term scheme for the British to rule over India (for the economic benefits).

Pg 75/6: Also there was the beginning of the transformation of the Indian economy and the British relationship to it, turning the Indian economy into something more “classically colonial” by “importing manufactured goods, and exporting raw resources”. This change of the Indian economy was a reason that the British wanted colonial rule, a new market to hawk their goods (though at the beginning of the initial take over of the subcontinent, the industrial revolution wasn’t quite starting).

Pg 68/9, 72: Once Lord Wellesley came into power, he led a military conquest of the subcontinent to expand British rule and along with the practice of subsidiary alliances (pg72/3) by 1818 with the defeat of the Marathas, the British had just about conquered the entire subcontinent.

3. Generally speaking, the certain social groups that had reason to feel discontent with the EIC would mostly be the lower social classes—the cultivators, the artisans (particularly weavers), the women, the mixed race children, and the tribal peoples and nomads. Indians who benefited from the EIC and therefore possibly supported the British were

going to be Indians of the higher class, Brahmans and Kayastha, in their various incarnations (sepoys, bhadralok).

Evidence:

When creating a legal and administrative code to rule by, the British used “pure” texts to get their “traditions” from. One particular case was their use of Brahman texts in law and not only elevated the Brahman status, but gave them an “unprecedented role in decision making” (59). Thus, this new entrenchment of Brahman authority would endear the British to them to a certain extent.

Pg 91: With the British categorizing and redefining Indian society and law certain changes were inevitable, especially the push back to “pure” traditions. “Women, once able to inherit property, found themselves excluded by a British determination to uphold ‘Hindu’ law.” A right that women once held by local tradition, stripped from them by the British as well as pressing hierarchy and ritual traditions and distinction on Indian society (not all of them, perhaps, kind to a woman’s personal rights and freedoms).

For social groups that were disgruntled with the British, the most obvious choice would be the cultivators. After first gaining Diwani in Bengal, the way the British auctioned off the collection rights and experimented with the taxes exacerbated the Great Famine of 1770, which claimed ¼ of Bengal pop. (77/8). Plus, with the implementation of the Permanent Settlement turning zamindars into landowners, British in effect reduced peasants into tenants without rights (78).

But the cultivators weren’t the only one’s who were affected negatively when the EIC came to power, and in some ways others were affected worse because what happened to them was unprecedented. For example, “Nawabi sovereignty was most visibly demeaned as the British took over for themselves the trade in a range of valuable commodities, notably salt, betel nut, tobacco, and saltpeter” (53), this was a high class whose power was reduced by the EIC until they didn’t even have enough money to spend on lavish courts (76). With the shifting economy of India to a more “classical colonial” one, weavers and various artisans were quickly becoming out of the job as more British manufactured textiles came in and less Indian cloth went out and less commodities were in demand from the nawabs (because of their own reduced position/power) (76). The children of the nabobs and their mistresses, the bibis, were of mixed raced and disdained by both Europeans and Indians and weren’t allowed to climb the social strata of the British (66/7). The various peoples (tribes, nomads etc.) who moved around and lived off the land were considered just people who could be paying taxes, but weren’t and British tried to coerce them to settle into agriculture (forced sedentarization), an example was the focus on the thagis and declaring them criminal (80). What all of these social groups have in common is that they were either displaced or thrown into hardship in a way that hadn’t really been seen before due to the actions of the British (and their rule) and would therefore not be happy with the EIC’s rule.

Those who prospered under the EIC includes the aforementioned Brahmans as their caste was given extra authority, but also the high caste as sepoy (61/2) with newfound pride as a soldier, and pension, and regular pay, as well as the bhadralok (respectable people) (88/9), those that

bought the zamindaries when they were put up for sale after the permanent settlement, mostly the Brahman and Kayastha employees of the EIC and of the old zamindaries (79). All of these people gained wealth and even some power under the EIC rule.

4. The idea that the British brought “civilizing” influences to India is subjective to one’s idea of civilized. The British certainly influenced Indian economy and social structure, and attempted to impart order on what they couldn’t understand and labeled chaos, but I would change the term “civilizing influence” to a “Western influence” with all their categorization and morals.

Evidence:

As the first governor-general Hastings imposed the first set of real British administration upon India. He had the idea to “adapt our Regulations to the Manners and Understandings of the People, and the Exigencies of the Country, adhering as closely as we are able to their ancient Uses and Institutions” (57), meaning that Hastings was bringing the British idea of precedence to the way the EIC was going to run India based off of their “pure” original texts (58). Using these texts (particularly the Brahman legal texts) gave the British the idea to impose a rigid, stratified social hierarchy upon India that hadn’t truly been there before and stripping it of local traditions and more fluid legal mediations (59, 91), and probably weren’t as appreciated as the British might have thought because they took away different rights (91). But this was a sort of Western influence because the British themselves had a social hierarchy and therefore it was acceptable to endorse.

This insistence to go off texts to govern India as well as the belief that India was a declining nation mostly due to Muslim rule over non-Muslims began to separate and stratify strong categories between ‘Muslim’ and ‘Hindu’ that had never been before (58,88). Which followed the British need to categorize and label everything (especially Indian systems) to better understand it “scientifically” (64).

The various social reforms, for example: the abolition of sati, that British liberals so pushed for was in actuality of very little consequence, while they tiptoed around tougher subjects like the Rajputs female infanticide (82/3). This application of “Western” morals upon Indian society does not make much of a difference at all.

The reason that British liberals one of the most “civilizing influences” (Western influences) was the spread and belief of Christianity which they used as a justification to push their liberal agendas to “save” the people from “despotism”, “priestcraft”, and “superstition” (81) as well as anything else that grated wrongly on the British moral compass, though like I mentioned before, in the end, it had very little impact as a whole.

There was also the shift from Orientalism to Anglicism and the British installing colleges to produce clerks in Indian cities and the overall introduction and implementation of the “English” education (83) though such learning did start before Bentinck at private European and Indian initiative.

Also, the change from exporting cloth goods to importing them and becoming classical colony economy put many people out of the job and ground the making of any sort of Indian commodities to a halt (76), an economic change due to various policies and expectations of the British that wasn't universally appreciated anywhere but Britain's new industrial empire.