

The Effects of Colonialism on British India and British Malaya

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Abstract: The British Empire has constructed extensive railways, vectors of economic modernization, which has greatly improved the capacity and speed of long-distance transportation. Colonial education, has implemented with the intention of maintaining British rule, trained local intellectuals and facilitated political modernization after independence. However, such modern infrastructures are put into place to further exploitation. By and large, there has been some good brought through the British Empire, but only as a by-product of a colonial system that also has brought harm. In this essay, I briefly examine education systems and railroad infrastructure in two distinct colonies, British India and British Malaya, to illustrate and compare the effects of British colonialism.

1. Introduction

During my early life, wolf-warrior diplomacy and nationalist fervor hadn't yet caught the minds of the Chinese public, but instead their opposites had [1]. At a very young age, during economic liberalization, before the firewall and censorship systems were developed, I became an Internet user. Accordingly, I quickly acquainted myself with a result of the massive influx of foreign capital into China at the time – colonialist ideology. In places where angry diatribes directed towards the U.S. and U.K, or the “Anglo-Saxon Slavery Anti-humanity Gang” now flourish, I found exaggerated praises to the “Lighthouse of Democracy” and the “Nation of the Gentlemen” [2]. There was no hard-working, peace-loving Chinese person, but instead, the uncivilized, inferior “Shina” - a slur that Japanese imperialists had called the nation [3]. Being born nine years after the end of the British colonial empire, I lived to witness the victory of colonial mentality in my country's public opinion that was then nominally free from colonization. I began to wonder, what did colonial empires like the British do that preserved a mentality in the hearts of colonized people years after collapse? In this essay, I work through the historical mechanisms that underlie this kind of thinking to answer the question, “Was there anything good about the British empire?”

2. British India

2.1. Railroad Construction in British India

Railway construction was a central economic activity during British colonial rule in India (1858-1947). Analysis of the expansion of the rail system in British India is important to understanding the forms of economic modernization brought about by British colonialism. The first passenger line in India opened in 1853, five years before the official initiation of crown rule. It stretched 20 miles in total, from Bombay to Thana [4]. The rail network grew rapidly after that point, increasing from 9,308 km in 1880 to 24,752 km in 1900, to over 40,000 km by independence in the mid-20th century [4]. Early rails were not very profitable. By 1860, the rails generated revenue that equaled less than 0.9% of construction investments. However, by the end of that decade, the railway returns gradually increased to 3%. Between 1860 and 1939 capital grew quickly, reaching an annual capital stock growth of 4.4% per year, and bolstering investment [4]. However, this growth in capital was only possible, and subsequent private investment only successful, because of the Indian colonial government's public guarantee of returned interest [5].

Most of the goods transported on the rail were agricultural exports, including grain, cotton, tea, and oilseeds [6]. Minerals, most commonly coal, were also transported for export, as well as for railway system maintenance. Traffic of agricultural goods and minerals exceeded 50,000 tons by 1912, at a time where the total traffic was somewhere below 60,000 tons [6]. However, transportation of manufactured goods was rare. Traffic in manufactured goods averaged 5% of all traffic between 1883 and 1912, with most being imports [6]. Such patterns of high raw-material export and low manufactured-good import, alongside the contemporaneous British monopoly on Indian international trade, attest to the conclusion that the function of the railway system by this period was to sustain a colonial economy.

The social impacts of the railway were mixed. Around 60 native engine drivers were employed by the Great Indian Peninsular Railways by the end of 1882 [5]. Along with Europeans and Anglo-Indians, Indians were hired as railway guards in Madras, however they received lower pay [5]. The Jamalpur Workshop by the turn of the 20th century, which repaired engines, had almost 10,000 employees, almost all of them natives [5]. Indian laborers were often celebrated for their high skill and low price [5]. Indians, instead of showing widespread animosity, saw the rail as an industrial wonder and connected its might to aspects of the Hindu divine [5]. This reverence persisted throughout the colonial period.

2.2. Education System in British India

Language usage in education was one of the main ways that British colonists legitimized their rule over Indian natives throughout the colonial period. Education was initiated by missionaries in the large port cities of India to promote British literature and science among native Indians [7]. By 1857, three universities were constructed. The organizers of such schools promoted secular education in English, and were against the teaching of native religions and native languages [7]. Indian students who overcame the language barrier and achieved a college degree were given the additional honor of being called “learned native” [7].

Colonial education did increase the average years a person spent in school, but the improvement was little compared to other regions with similar levels of development. The average person in India (15–64 years old) spent 0.88 years in school in 1940 compared to 0.03 years in 1870 [7]. However, India fell behind China and Latin America by significant margins by 1950 [7]. Compared to the performance of education systems of other countries, the British Indian education system seemed more like an overt means of colonization due to its slow development and failure to educate equitably.

English education in India did provide social mobility and economic development, but it also fractured Indian society, and served to construct a new class order. Apart from class and caste, English language became a new ticket to higher social positions. As post-colonial India became more involved in a US-dominated global economy, it benefited from a prospering IT industry led by English-speaking professionals. The language became a requirement for obtaining skilled jobs, as being fluent in English was found to increase hourly wages of men by 34% [8]. However, English education gradually became a new barrier between social classes. The wealthy send their kids to English schools so they can benefit from modernity, while the poor who can't afford education are denied access to such fruits. In the post-colonial age, the ruling classes in India have continued to speak English and send their children to private, English-language schools, while regional languages have been prioritized over English in public schools [9]. English has become the new Sanskrit—a language that the lower classes and castes can't touch.

3. British Malaya

3.1. Railroad Construction in British Malaya

In British Malaya (1824-1957), colonists, in consideration of British interests, established a railway system and built infrastructure that objectively improved living standards. With the establishment of a track connecting Taiping and Port Weld in the state of Perak, the construction of

railways began in 1885 [10]. From 1897 to 1903, separate rails were gradually connected into a unified system called the Federated Malay States Railways, which sprawled across the west coast of the Malay Peninsula [10]. By 1930, the rail system had connected the entirety of the west coast, and also spread to Kota-Bharu in the east coast, connecting most of the large cities in peninsular Malaysia [10]. The motivation for such construction was primarily to accelerate the transportation of tin and rubber, natural resources with high yields. The results were beneficial: between 1913 and 1950 British Malayan economy grew by 1.5% a year, far exceeding that of British India, which grew at about 0.01% between 1900 and 1947 [11]. Despite this, the railway stimulated the demands of British manufacturers before it served local demands. Most of the labor materials needed to construct and operate the railways were imported from abroad. Of the 11,643 staff that operated the FMS railways, only 1,570 were Malays [12]. Ties for the Malaysian railway were supplied from India and Australia until 1903, when a tie mill was established [13]. Up until the “Central Workshops” were constructed in Kuala Lumpur between 1904 and 1906, all passenger cars were imported from Britain [12]. Britain continued to provide all the metal frames, locomotives, and rails for many years after that [13].

3.2. Education System in British Malaya

Colonial education in Malaysia was less successful than any other Southeast Asian states and colonies, and did harm to the construct of Malaysian local nationalism. As of 1947, illiteracy in British Malaya remained at 61.6%, higher than Ceylon (Siri-Lanka) (37%), Philippines (40%), Thailand (46.3%), and Singapore (53.5%) [14]. Only 20% of workers in government were indigenous [14]. The education system in colonial Malaysia was divided between Malay, Tamil, Chinese, and English vernacular schools. Students were taught exclusively under a single cultural and educational philosophy, with little linguistic exchange [15]. The English schools, for example, were built exclusively in the cities, and socialized students for British society, detached from the indigenous environments present in Malaysia. As a result, such an educational system increased racial tensions, and widened the gap between the common people and the ruling classes.

4. Conclusion

The two different case studies from the British Empire explored in this essay prove my point that there was some good brought through the British Empire, but only as a byproduct of a colonial system that also brought harm. Looking at education systems and transportation economics allowed us to see the totality of the colonial model and the negative effects it had on the colonized populations, while acknowledging that certain advancements did occur through colonial exchange.

The concepts of colonial exploitation and expansion of access to resources run through the examples provided in this essay. In India, long tracts of railroad were constructed and the locals appreciated the locomotive as an industrial and spiritual wonder. However, it served a colonial economy through raw material extraction and the stagnation of local economic growth. English education provided a new means to achieve social mobility and benefited independent India in a global economy dominated by English-speaking countries. However, such education made limited contributions compared to areas of similar development, and English became the new Sanskrit in the post-colonial age. In Malaysia, the role of the railroad was similar, but it contributed more to local economic growth. Education, on the other hand, divided the nation. Schools in Malaysia were segregated based on language and ethnicity, while students in each system were taught limited information about other groups, further dividing Malaysian society.

Native populations used many of the gains brought by the colonizers, such as those discussed in this essay, towards independence. English-educated elites such as Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru fought for and won an independent India. Those founding fathers used what they learned in English colonial and mainland institutions to construct their new nation [16]. Malay independence was achieved through a union of racial groups, who came together to form their new nation, Malaysia. However, “Malay identity”, a remnant of colonial racial policy, including the separated education systems discussed in this essay, remained predominant [17]. In this way, colonially

mediated racial identity continued to challenge the foundation of independent Malaysia.

General opinions about British colonialism have shifted over the last few decades, and are still constantly in flux. Over the last ten years, I witnessed the polarization of public opinions between two sides of colonialism. In my early life, the Chinese general public upheld a colonial mentality by praising the English-speaking countries, while referring to their own nation pejoratively. In just a few years, such a mentality was replaced by the opposite extreme, a mentality of the colonists. The nation's goals became superior over everything else. To emerging nationalists, English-speaking countries have become hives of evil, and their people, vulgar, unintelligent scenery to be observed from a distance. While colonial empires may have all but perished, colonialism still lingers on in various forms in the hearts of people today.

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