

The Republic of India: Postcolonial or Developing Nation?

The nature of colonialism is such that it is all consuming -- evading time and the restraints of natural social balances in a manner that confounds historians and psychologists alike, even today. Within the throes of colonialism rise issues concerning social division, the merging and separation of races, and the cultivation and growth of emerging cultural sects. As postcolonialism succeeds the fluctuating waves of oppression and segregation that colonialism left behind, it deals with a new era -- one that engages in the discourse of social issues brought on by oppressed group dynamics and the systematic shaping of culture. The republic of India remains one of the largest post colonial nations till date, boasting an enormous 1.324 billion people with an independent history of only 70 years.

Although sometimes classified as obsolete in western records, the Indian caste system is a leftover remnant of colonialism that affects almost every citizen of the country, even today. While the system doesn't function as systematically as it used to, the presence of social stigmas surrounding each cast, especially those in the lower half (colloquially termed "backwards castes") are as prominent and widespread as other popular discrimination in the western world. European colonialism gave license to the all consuming nature of this archaic hierarchy system, and was able to divide the nation amongst itself enough to ensure a lack of united rebellion against the system.

As the nation traveled through the colonial experience of not only Great Britain, but the previous Islamic Empire as well, the divides and social classes brought on by both were expansive and long lasting. The European hand was one that was as heavy as it was large, and with its strength came years of nation-shaping turmoil. India's status as the daughter of Great

Britain affected the progress of its developing culture and religion, and as each mirrored the other, change became the cyclical constant that needed only to be tipped off by the European fist. This essay will argue that European colonialism, Hinduism, and the caste system all interact with each other in a way that suggests their place as key role players in the prevalence of India's dual culture today -- shedding light on postcolonialism's effect on not only India's past and present, but its future as well.

When analyzing this three-way symbiotic relationship, it's easiest to first dissect the exchange between Hinduism and the caste system. Manali S. Deshpande discusses in his essay, *History of the Indian Caste System and Its Impact on India Today*, the significance of the caste system's inherent ties to the Hindu religion, stating that "the caste system was rationalized in ancient India on various grounds. One of them was the justification in the Vedas. The caste system would not have found approval among the vedic people unless there was some reference to it in the Vedas" (24). The caste system remains as successful as it is today not only because of colonialism's division of the nation, but also because of its various appearances in the holy Vedic texts. The system took more from Hinduism than just its roots, implementing rules and creating stigmas according to those referenced in Hindu material. An example can be found in the stigma surrounding cleanliness, a large quantifier of purity in religious texts. Deshpande states that "cleanliness is considered to be a very important value in Hinduism, and the caste system enforces this idea. Untouchability was thus a means of exclusivism, a social device that became religious only by being drawn into the pollution-purity complex" (16). Deshpande references the pollution-purity complex of India, an idea that conceptualizes the aversion most citizens of highly polluted nations like India harbor toward the idea of "dirtiness" and "impurity." By

equating uncleanness to members of the lower-tier castes by calling them the *untouchables* -- often homeless people with limited access to hygiene -- the caste system successfully ostracizes an entire group of people and thus showcases a perfect example of Hinduism's role in shaping such a large facet of Indian society.

Once the relationship between the religion and the system is established as practically causal in nature, the next step in analysis is the examination of colonialism's role in the shaping of Hinduism. While the religion was not brought to the nation by its colonizers, its place on the pedestal of Indian societal morals was aided largely by the push of European settlers. The word Hindu itself originates from the word "Hindoo," a Persian word used to classify people from the area around Northeastern India and Pakistan. The adoption of such a word as a singular identifier for members of both the nation and religion demonstrates, from conception, a term of external definition and a lack of self-determined identity. A nation that was so underdeveloped and fragile at the time, the lack of one uniting religion only heightened the likelihood of crumbling monarchies and a country ripe for the taking.

European colonialism didn't introduce Hinduism to the nation so much as it established it, unintentionally giving the faith the concreteness it needed to thrive in a nation so divided. In his essay *The Impact of European Colonialism on the Indian Caste System*, Ben Heath discusses the merits of colonialism in the strengthening of Hinduism, stating that, "before British colonialism, those who would now be defined as Hindu existed without one collective identity and certainly did not possess a unified collective religious identity. The group now defined as Hindu can be said to have existed only because it was a group independent of Islam, Christianity or Judaism, although not internally coherent" (3). Heath ultimately claims that the act of

comparing the books of Hinduism to those of other faiths allowed the then underdeveloped faith to flourish in a way that wasn't viable until struck against the cords of dissimilarity. Barely a scattered gathering before, once Hinduism was considered on the same platform as other large religions, those that identified with Hindu beliefs were more inclined to identify themselves as such.

With the sudden surge of people identifying as Hindu came an influx of those advocating for a stronger caste system as well, and colonisers had yet again set in motion a chain of unintentional events in the shaping of Indian history. In fact, many of the British expatriates present in India while this surge occurred declared themselves members of the highest caste of *Brahmins*, an effort to further preserve their superiority. While these consequences weren't foreseen when external religions were introduced, they were significant and direct nonetheless. Insofar as it strengthened the faith, colonialism's role in this fortification wasn't entirely intentional. The British tendency toward the Sanskrit language was yet another unintentional tenet in the progression of the religion. As Sanskrit, a language that was as linguistic as it was liturgic, became more and more normalized in Indian media and society by British rule, Hinduism consequently progressed as well. The emergence of a steady Hindu identity can be largely attributed to these (and other) British habits, creating yet another direct relationship between postcolonialism and India's modern society, albeit this time correlational as opposed to causational in nature.

In the process of establishing the reflexive relationships between these three tenets of Indian history-- colonialism, Hinduism, and the caste system -- it's important to also consider the postcolonial undertones of the history they've since created. The postcolonial culture of India is

forever changed by its experience as an oppressed colony, largely because of the nature of Britain's effect on the now centuries-old nation. India's experience throughout this colonial period is unique in that it was almost completely isolated from the rest of the global platform, allowing British rule to exist within a vacuum. India sat between the geographically isolating Himalayan Mountain Range and the then culturally isolating Middle Eastern Empire, allowing it to create a culture separate from not much other than British rule. From the remnants of this rule that are still present in India's culture today came a new subculture, one that explores the similarities and differences between Indian and British traditions. The country, despite its firm spot in the category of "underdeveloped nation," still boasts the title of second largest English-speaking population in the world, second only to the United States. A direct consequence of British rule, the vast and almost universal reach of the language pulled its own weight in uniting the country and steering it further onto the western road it was already veering toward. The introduction and wide-swept power of the English language simply served as a supplement to the already pivotal change in culture the British had induced, and coupled with their effect on the religion, India saw a culture shock it hadn't ever experienced before. The introduction of the English language further polarized an already tense atmosphere, successfully excluding backwards caste members from the education they couldn't afford and allowing those in the upper castes to settle more comfortably into their privilege, a polarization we still see the effects of today. The public schooling system in India today is still in abysmal condition, while the private schooling system remains unaffordable for most members of backwards castes, furthering the notion of English (and education) as a luxury as opposed to a necessity.

Alongside other secondary effects like this, postcolonialism provoked the birth and widespread concept of a dual culture, one that exists as a modern intersection of the western and eastern world. These leftover traditions stand as a testament to the all encompassing power and effect of colonialism, portraying how the presence of a European monarchy was able to change not only 200 years of the nation's history, but the course of its future as well. Within these 200 years, the changes implemented by a British Raj that rarely even entered the country were massive, and unique in their absorption into traditional Indian society. It can be argued that the specific nature of this regime also contributed to the creation of India's modern culture, since most British colonizers refused to settle in the country itself. This attitude forced a distance between the colonizer and the colonized that eventually proved itself helpful in the preservation of Indian customs; rather than the complete abolition of native life that has otherwise been known to occur, the physical absence of British settlers allowed India to merge its colonizer's practices with its own cultural identity.

In the postcolonial light of a new century, aspects of Indian culture, including but not limited to its secularity and universal English medium, come to represent a facet of the culture brought on not necessarily by the colonial period, but rather by India's interaction with its own colonial identity post independence. India's postcolonial identity exists in large parts as a byproduct of Hinduism and the caste system, which in turn are hugely affected by the 200 year British rule they developed within. Today, even job and college applications in India have voluntary caste identification portions, with huge efforts being made in the way of affirmative action for those applying from backwards castes, and thus disadvantaged backgrounds. The country is equal parts affected by its status as a postcolonial nation *and* a developing nation,

creating a dichotomy between its past and present that aids to the fluctuating dual culture so prominent in its citizens. Regardless of the seven decades since colonialism settled its roots in Hinduism and the caste system, the postcolonial identity of India is still consistently being shaped by its former oppressor via the grips of Hinduism and the caste system.