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BRITISH REACTION TO THE
DEVELOPMENT OF AN
INDIAN NATIONAL IDENT-
ITY, 1858-1914



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CHANGING PERCEPTIONS: BRITISH
REACTION TO THE DEVELOPMENT
OF AN INDIAN NATIONAL IDENTITY,
1858-1914

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***Changing Perceptions: British reaction to the development
of an Indian national identity, 1858-1914.***

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The period between the Mutiny of 1857 and the outbreak of World War One in 1914 marks a decisive period in Indian history. The perceptions of the eighteenth century were swiftly replaced by new images which better characterised a new 'patronising attitude to all things Indian'.¹ Old perceptions were eroded and new ones created in response to the changes in the British presence in India. This paper will look first at the role of education in shaping British perceptions, and then discuss how these changed with the arrival in India of the families of officials. I will then turn to focus more on the 'Official mind', that is to say the officials working both in India and at home in London, and how changes in this were reflected in imperial policy. Finally, I shall summarise how the British perceived India and its subjects on the eve of war. The aim of this paper then is not so much to re-interpret the history for this period, such a task would be impossible in the space allowed, but rather to re-establish a sense of context in the historical debate. In particular, 'Divide and Rule' seems to have become accepted and given more prominence as a policy than it perhaps merits.² As this essay will attempt to show, it is more valuable to examine the underlying changes in British perceptions that underpinned the appearance of what has become known as the policy of 'Divide and Rule'. Arguably the first notable instance of this change in British attitudes towards India was back as early as February 1835 when Thomas Babington Macauley, the President of the Board of Education, wrote a Minute stating his aims for the Anglicisation of education in India.

British education policy in India reflected a far deeper and wider debate that had its roots in the very nature of British imperialism. The logic behind the attempt to improve the education of its subjects was, in the minds of the Victorians, simple: 'imitate England, imitate

¹ M.E. Chamberlain, *Britain and India: The interaction of Two Peoples* (Newton Abbot, 1974) p. 52.

² The belief that British rule in India could best be maintained by exacerbating and playing upon natural cleavages within Indian society. Whether or not one accepts the claim that this was British policy, it is important to note that the divisions within the society have their roots in pre-British India.

English political institutions, imitate English sport, learn the English language, study English literature, English history and English philosophy'.³ It was a policy that reflected a contempt for oriental civilisation which was prevalent among an increasingly dominant segment of British officials, among whom the leading personality was Macauley. The aim of the policy was to create what Macauley called 'a class of persons, Indian in colour but English in taste and intellect'.⁴ He didn't mince his words when he condemned the practice of educating through the medium of the local vernaculars. To do this, he exclaimed, would be to countenance 'at the public expense, medical doctrines which would disgrace an English farrier, astronomy, which would move laughter in girls at an English boarding-school, history, abounding with kings thirty feet high and reigns thirty thousand years long, and geography made up of seas of treacle and lands of butter'.⁵ Perhaps ironically, though, this policy, despite its obvious contempt for most things Indian, remained the most effective way in which Indians could learn the skills to allow them to one day govern.

Admitting Indians into Government, however, was far from the minds of the British in the aftermath of the Mutiny. The Mutiny, and particularly the death of Britons during it had 'deeply scarred' British public opinion.⁶ Despite opposition from liberal philosophers such as John Stuart Mill,⁷ India was brought under parliamentary control and so exposed to all the forces contained within that body, most notably racism and the need to fit in with Great Britain's "immediate obligations to its constituents in the British Isles".⁸ The view of India as a "Land of Regrets" with Englishmen as the strangers was, by the 1880s, beginning to weaken

³ J.A.R. Marriott, *The English in India: A Problem of Politics* (Oxford, 1932) p. 196.

⁴ Javed Majeed, *Ungoverned imaginings; James Mill's The History of British India and Orientalism* (Oxford, 1992) pp. 199-200.

⁵ Marriott, p. 200.

⁶ Judith Brown, *Modern India: The origins of an Asian democracy* (Oxford, 1994) p. 96.

⁷ Marriott, p. 177.

⁸ Karl De Schweinitz, *The Rise and Fall of British India: Imperialism as Inequality* (London, 1983) p. 177; Brown, p. 96.

considerably and was to be outdated by the end of World War One.⁹ The pragmatic imperialism of the East India Company was, with direct rule, increasingly replaced with a sense of moral superiority. The imperial policy, shaped by the dominant philosophical theories of the time such as Utilitarianism and Evangelism, produced and justified imperial stereotypes of Indian race, class and gender.¹⁰ Whilst James Mill advocated using India as a testing ground for English law in order to discover its weaknesses and Macauley, in contrast, preferred the straight transfer of English law on the basis that it was the best model available, the net result was the same. British opinion came to view India as an integral part of its own self-identity.¹¹

With complete families able to travel out to India following the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869, this sense of identification was increased as the English community took on the appearance of being almost a separate caste. This was a theme which is portrayed in much of the Indian work of Rudyard Kipling. Indeed, the sense of loyalty typical of castes is to a degree evident in so far as Kipling was at his most critical of the British in India only after he had returned to England and was no longer under this restraint.¹² The roles fashioned by particularly the women, or Memsahibs, was a mirror of their role in England. The desire by Englishwomen to transfer, with few alterations, the expectations and formalities that typified the rigid society of nineteenth century England played an important role in maintaining social stratification in Indian society.¹³ The interaction between Indians and the English on a personal level, that had occurred previously, ceased. The rigidity demanded by English society, when transferred on to the Indian sub-continent, extended to

⁹ Michael Edwardes, *British India 1772-1947. A Survey of the nature and effects of alien rule* (London, 1967) p. 173.

¹⁰ Brown, pp. 103-4.

¹¹ Majeed, pp. 128-142; Brown, p. 102.

¹² *Kim*, arguably one of the best pieces of literature written on colonial India at this time, was written on Kipling's return to England. Previous work written in India took a view more biased against the Indian. Edwardes, pp. 170-3.

¹³ Brown, p. 99.

cover non-English community members also. The English-educated Indian middle classes found themselves in no-man's land.¹⁴ They were isolated from their roots by virtue of their education and position but were not accepted by the English rulers as equals. The very class of people that the British imperial policy had created now found itself alienated by its creator.

On both sides of the colonial relationship there was an increasingly hyper-critical attitude. In part due to education and in part due to their developing national consciousness, the Indian élite became increasingly isolated.¹⁵ The British, still reeling from the psychological impact of the Mutiny, felt disillusioned with both their Indian subjects, for being less pliant than they supposed, and with themselves, for misreading the strength of their command.¹⁶ The Mutiny, not surprisingly, had made a profound and lasting impression on both the British and Indians.¹⁷ However, by the 1880s not only had the relationship soured, the very context of the relationship had changed.¹⁸

Ainslee Embree begins his analysis of India's search for national identity in 1880 for the very reason that, as suggested above, by this time India had reached a pivotal time.¹⁹ The Government of India was now forced to confront the most basic premises of its imperial policy. Would it continue along the path of alienation or would it seek a rapprochement with the local communities? By the 1880's, the British in India were increasingly perceiving that the India they thought they knew was changing, and that they were being challenged to react accordingly. However, it is also important to note at this time that there was not one single 'British' reaction. For all the references to the British as a group, it is important to understand

¹⁴ K.M. Panikkar, *The Foundations of New India* (London, 1963) p. 86.

¹⁵ S.R. Mehrotra, *India and the Commonwealth, 1885-1929* (London, 1965) pp. 23-4.

¹⁶ Britain saw the masses as politically inert and the Westernised classes as increasingly intransigent, they saw the aristocracy - the traditional ruling class - as their best source of support. Chamberlain, p. 163; de Schweinitz, pp. 173-4.

¹⁷ Edwardes, p. 272.

¹⁸ Brown, p. 107.

¹⁹ For a summary of the position in India with regard to the administration, communications, economics, population, law, education and religion in the 1880s, see Ainslee T. Embree, *India's Search for National Identity* (Delhi, 1988) pp. 5-20 and de Schweinitz, pp. 177-8. Edwardes, pp. 254-5 deals with the condition of women's education.

that they were by no means a monolithic group.²⁰ This diversity within the British in India was demonstrated by what Judith Brown terms the 'White Mutiny' over the introduction of the Ilbert Bill in 1883.²¹

The Ilbert Bill was intended by Lord Ripon, the Viceroy²², as a 'tidying up' measure to give Indian magistrates jurisdiction over Europeans in criminal cases outside presidency towns - jurisdiction already existed within the towns and in civil cases existed everywhere.²³ As the term 'tidying up measure' implies, it was a move not thought to be overly controversial. However, non-official Europeans, mainly planters in country districts in alliance with the Calcutta bar, were angered by the move to, in effect, rob them of the one of their last remaining legal privileges. There was even talk among some quarters of a move to settle their own independent Indian state, such was the sense of betrayal.²⁴ Typical of the rhetoric used by the non-official Europeans is a comment made by a British lawyer at a mass meeting in Calcutta in February of that year. He warned of the "wily natives" poisoning the minds of the rulers whilst Mrs Annette Beveridge, in India to help Indian women, claimed the Bill would subject "civilised women [that is Englishwomen] to the jurisdiction of men who have done little or nothing to redeem the women of their own race, and whose social ideas are still on the outer verge of civilisation".²⁵ The vehemence of the expatriate calls and the somewhat indifferent attitude of Ripon to the reforms allowed a compromise to be found whereby at least half the jurors would be European. Ironically, this apparent success for the European community gave a fresh sense of direction to the Indian nationalist movements. It was now clear to them the true power that could be potentially wielded by mass action. The

²⁰ Brown, p. 129.

²¹ Brown, p. 136.

²² The Marquess of Ripon, before inheriting the title from his paternal uncle, had served as a Liberal M.P.. As a peer he served in the Cabinet, including a brief spell as Secretary of State for India. See Vicary Gibbs (Ed), *The Complete Peerage* Volume XI (London: St. Catherine Press, 1913) pp. 4-6.

²³ Chamberlain, pp. 165-8.

²⁴ Embree, pp. 27-8.

²⁵ Edwardes, p. 166.

middle classes, for so long distrusting of the masses, realised that their futures were inextricably linked together. India was beginning to attain the attributes necessary for a move towards the next level of nationalist activity: the spreading to the masses the notion of a correlation between national and personal identity. Despite all the undiluted "racial arrogance" of the European community and their no less vulgar expression of racial sentiments, indeed maybe even because of this, the tide turned irresistibly in favour of the nationalists.²⁶ Discussions and representations over democracy, hitherto a distant goal of the nationalists, came irreversibly on to the political stage and by the time Lord Curzon arrived as Viceroy in 1899,²⁷ Congress had established its own exclusive and intolerant brand of nationalism in the face of a European backlash that had already found outlet through the Ilbert Bill agitation.²⁸ Curzon's vicerealty has been branded as a "disaster" by some historians²⁹ and by contemporaries of the time as being akin to that of an Asian autocrat.³⁰ However, whatever the success or style of his rule, his policies reflected the conservative sentiment of the time. He had no faith in the ability of Indians to administer themselves. He saw no desirability in trying to deceive either the Indians or himself that nationalist demands for participation could or should be met. His policies, such as the Universities Act of 1904 which brought education under direct government control, were not intended to be illiberal.³¹ However, as with Ripon's attempt with the Ilbert Bill, he neglected to consider seriously the potential for opposition.

²⁶ Edwardes, p. 167.

²⁷ Lord Curzon received one of the last Irish peerages created in 1898. He became Earl Curzon of Kedleston in 1911, assuming the title of 1st Marquess in 1921. Immediately before being appointed Viceroy to India in 1898, taking up the post 1 January 1899 until resigning in 1905, he had served as a Conservative M.P. (1886-1898) where he held the posts of Under Secretary of State for India (1891-92) and Under Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs (1895-98). He was Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs between 1919 and 1924. See *Who Was Who 1916-1928* (London: A. & C. Black Ltd., 1929) p. 256; Gibbs, Volume III, pp. 580-2.

²⁸ Abdul Hamid, *Muslim Separatism in India. A Brief survey 1858-1947* (London, 1967) p. 46.

²⁹ Such as Muriel Chamberlain, p. 176.

³⁰ Comment made by Noarji on Curzon's departure in 1905. Embree, p. 41.

³¹ Chamberlain, pp. 176-7.

Whilst the Ilbert Bill had incurred mass opposition from the European community, the decision by Curzon in 1905 to partition Bengal prompted a similar mass reaction from the Hindu population. A move which made good administrative sense, it was also one which drove a wedge between the Hindu and Muslim communities. It would not be fair, however, on the basis of this, to claim that the decision was made solely in accordance with a policy of "Divide-and-Rule"; although Austen Chamberlain, a critic of Curzon's viceroyalty, observes that "Britain would have been either extraordinarily stupid or extraordinarily altruistic if they had not seen the advantages of not having all their potential critics and opponents united against them".³² Certainly the partition did divide the communities but, it could be argued, it also unified each community internally. Curzon did not consider the prospect of Indian responses "primarily because he did not believe that Indian nationalism posed any real danger to the British". So strong was his belief and his determination to follow his own instinct that he ignored the advice of the Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal who warned that it was a "great and specific issue which could give unity of purpose to all actions of the nationalist movement".³³

Muslims welcomed the chance to escape at least to some degree the prospect of Hindu dominance. In contrast, Hindus saw the policy as a failure of their policy of petitioning the British and began a move within Congress for a more radical thrust.³⁴ Although the extremists within Congress failed to seize control, they were successful in forcing the moderates to adopt a more "energetic" approach.³⁵ *Swadeshi*³⁶ and calls for representation on the Viceroy's Council was the Hindu response.³⁷ It was an approach which was perceived

³² Chamberlain, p. 180.

³³ Edwardes, p. 288.

³⁴ Edwardes, p. 289; Mehrotra, pp. 36-7.

³⁵ Mehrotra, p. 37.

³⁶ *Swadeshi*: The boycotting of British manufactured goods in favour of those produced within India. A measure intended to strengthen India's economic base whilst also hurting the British, it gave the nationalist movement a more indigenous base and widened its appeal across Hindu society.

³⁷ Hamid, pp. 56-7; Chamberlain, p. 180.

by Muslims as a direct threat.³⁸ The founding of the All-India Muslim League in 1906 was their direct reply. The partition of Bengal had divided Hindus and Muslims both psychologically and physically and sparked off a new direction for Congress and the formal politicisation of Muslims as a communal group.

Curzon's departure and his replacement by Lord Minto did not immediately spark off a similar new direction in British policy. There was not, however, long to wait. The defeat of the Conservatives in the General Election of 1905 brought into power a Liberal government and with it a new Secretary of State. John Morley, an elderly Liberal with no real ambition to embark on a great revolution in India, possessed, however, great insight into the Indian problem.³⁹ The relationship may at first appear a strange one. Minto was essentially a soldier-administrator, he saw parliament's interference in Indian affairs as the greatest danger to British rule in India. In contrast, Morley was by nature a reforming liberal, he saw India's rigid bureaucracy rather than the democracy back home as being at the root of the Indian problem. However, both had one belief in common. They agreed on the need to keep the Government of India firmly autocratic with sovereignty solidly in British hands and, with this secure, on the necessity of involving Indians in the administration. This new British perception of their role in India was not as drastically different as it first appears. There was still no prospect of Home Rule. However, it offered Indians, Hindus and Muslims alike, the chance to take an active role in the administration. The principle of communal representation was accepted by Morley and Minto marking the beginning of a departure into separate electorates that was not questioned by British officials until the Montagu-Chelmsford reforms over a decade later.

That the policy was actually translated into law and remained so for so long despite the many objections in England is indicative of the perceptions of the Morley-Minto

³⁸ Chamberlain, p. 180.

³⁹ Mehrotra, p. 47.

partnership.⁴⁰ They saw themselves as responsible to India and not to Great Britain. The great emphasis of the period was on striking a judicious balance between repression and conciliation and on emphasising that India had an honoured place within the Empire.⁴¹ It seems that Minto's decision to accept Muslim calls for separate representation was rooted not in the notion of "Divide-and-Rule" but instead in the belief that the Government would benefit from having all groups represented on her Councils, as would the groups benefit from their representation.⁴²

All this said, British perceptions on the eve of the First World War were increasingly coming to focus on the case of Islam. The case of Turkey in the years immediately preceding 1914 had highlighted the potential volatility of Muslim sentiment. The Muslims, although a minority within India, were among the most vociferous of the Islamic communities under British rule. Pan-Islamism united the Muslims of India, Turkey and the Middle East into one potentially powerful group.

P.C. Bamford, author of the official Government of India history on the Non-co-operation and Khilafat movements, argued that Pan-Islamism was not a "live force" until 1911. Not coincidentally, 1911 also saw the reversal of the partition of Bengal, a move that was seen by Muslims as a broken British promise and encouraged them to look elsewhere for a sense of security. The British perception of Pan-Islamism is perhaps best summed up by focusing on a report by the Assistant Director of the Intelligence Bureau, Mr Petrie, who in 1912 investigated Muslim unrest in the Punjab. Muslims typically, he claimed, easily confused religion with politics and so that some could find a sinister motive in any British hostility against a Muslim state did not surprise him. Furthermore, Muslims were all seen as

⁴⁰ The admission of Indians into the Councils raised objections in the British media, among past Viceroys (notably Curzon, see Marriott, p. 232), on the Councils themselves and even from the Prince of Wales and the King. Fortunately for Morley and Minto, Parliamentary approval was not needed. Mehrotra, pp. 48-9.

⁴¹ Richard Popplewell, *Intelligence and Imperial Defence: British Intelligence and the Defence of the Indian Empire, 1904-1924* (London, 1995) p. 60; Chamberlain, p. 184.

⁴² Chamberlain, p. 182.

potential fanatics who, once roused, would go to almost any lengths and could not be restrained by their leadership. The solidarity given to the community by the creation of the All-India Muslim League and the experience of seeing the successes of Congress in reversing the partition of Bengal was, Petrie predicted, all the evidence they needed to embark on a more militant path. With the Hindu press already in 1912 sympathising with the plight of Turkey, the prospect of a Hindu-Muslim entente was neither alarmist nor visionary; it would be though "the most dangerous step Pan-Islamism could take in India". Petrie saw a general Muslim mistrust of British intentions towards Islam that was bringing together "blind fanatics and sober-minded persons in the instinctive self-defence of their religion". He was unwilling to predict the future path of Muslim politics but reiterated that the prospect of a Hindu-Muslim alliance was very real.⁴³

Written in 1912 these observations and perceptions of the situation were remarkably prophetic. In 1858, the British authorities were out of touch with their subjects. In the aftermath of the Mutiny, however, as I have tried to suggest, British perceptions entered into a period of great change. Their understanding of their responsibility to the Indian people changed as did the methods they chose to employ. By the outbreak of war, the imperial relationship between ruler and ruled in India was fundamentally different. India was indeed the "Jewel in the Crown" of the British Empire. As Britain took herself and her colonies into war, British rule in India was firmly entrenched. However, there were the seeds of future discontent and, arguably more significantly, there were the organisations that could seize these issues and transform them into political tools for the mobilisation of the masses. Although, some argue, the period 1858 to 1914 was relatively mundane with neither mutiny nor war, the underlying perceptions that governed how British officials saw the world in

⁴³ Chamberlain, pp. 110-112.

general, and the Muslim community in India in particular, developed and emerged to find a world at war and Muslim subjects of whose loyalty they were uncertain.