CHAPTER 2

ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL CONDITIONS IN
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CHAPTER II

Economic and social conditions in India in the latter half of nineteenth century

Advent of the British

As is well known, the growth of British power in India underwent three stages. In the first instance, the East India Company sought permission from the Mugal Emperor Jahangir in 1627 to trade with India. In order to safeguard their commercial interest, they settled establishments for storing their merchandise and had to employ armed forces to safeguard and protect them. This is what slowly involved them in the conflicts which was going on among different native groups. The second phase, therefore, consists of involvement in indigenous conflicts. This is what led to the third phase which starts with the acquisition of territory in India. The acquisition of territory in India took place after the battle of Plassey in 1757. After one more century of East India Company's rule, administration in India was taken over by British Crown in 1857 after the failure of what we may call the Indian War of Independence.

Now British Government needed active assistance to run its administration. After a continued lively debate on the nature of instruction to be given to Indians, the British took a decision, as a matter of policy, that the instruction should
be of the Western type and should be imparted through the medium of English. This policy decision had far-reaching consequences, not only academic but social, economic, cultural and political. As Macaulay had rightly imagined, this experiment brought into existence a new generation of people who were Western in mind and outlook though Indian in body. This posed further problems in the home and the family, in the village and local institutions, in the cities and industrial establishments and in Indian society in general.

It is necessary to review the nature of these problems in order to be able to appreciate their impact on a middle class intellectual writers like Premchand and the solutions which he attempted to offer to them in his works.

In the Queen's proclamation the British Government had declared its policy towards the Indian people. The British Government was to be neutral towards differences in religion, culture and social set-up. Posts in Government services were to be filled on merit irrespective of caste, creed and sect. Efficiency was to be the sole criterion when conducting administration. This had far-reaching effects, both good and evil. So far as primary education was concerned, the government took so little interest that its administration was transferred to Municipal and District Boards. Government concerned itself only with prescribing the syllabus and occasionally directing their officers to inspect educational institutions. Religious education which had been there in
the earlier tradition was now excluded and history and geography were added among the subjects of study. Arrangements for teacher training were introduced which, no doubt, improved the quality of the teachers, but altered traditional arrangement in which teachers were drawn from a particular social class. In the secondary schools a uniform syllabus of a more or less literary type was introduced and English was not only introduced as a language but actually made the medium of instruction. The worst effect of teaching through a foreign language was that pupils could not develop the habit (so essential in real education) of associating their written and spoken word with a notion already familiar. It taxed the memory of average pupil and if there were still capable and brilliant students among the products of this system, it was in spite of it. When they proceeded to higher education in Western type of the universities and colleges (of thes there were too few), they became blinded with the influence of their British superiors, took them as models and obeyed their orders faithfully, both in the office and outside. It is significant that in characterising Vyomesh Chandra Banerjee, the first President of the Indian National Congress, an Indian paper wrote "he looked every inch an Englishman, from the waving of his hand to the smoking of his cigarette."

Subsequently, as the number of graduates increased and competition for jobs became keener, unemployment resulted in increasing proportion and along with unemployment came
discontent, bitterness and disillusionment. The earlier generation of graduates, however, looked upon themselves as pioneers of a modern age and assumed the role of leaders whose minds were to be dominated with English education and transformed and enriched with Western culture. They made undisguised and earnest efforts to imitate what they considered the English way of life. Absence of religious education had already loosened the grip of tradition and the English way of life, as conceived by them, extended beyond the realm of intellect not only to dress, manners and diet but to new forms and ways in social life, such as individual liberty, love marriage and the like. It is true that admiration for the Western mode of life was accentuated by certain injustices in traditional society and abuses of power by persons in positions of privilege and authority. The new Indian Sahibs now started putting on English dress not only on social occasions but in the home, speaking in English even with friends and relations, living in bungalows furnished in the right Western style, eating Western dishes served in the Western way, i.e. on tables and chairs and even took to liquor and practised dances. They took their wives to the club for dances, though on fewer occasions, and all that was Western was taken to be civilised, supreme, elevating and even indispensable in amelioration of society at large. The fact, however, remained that the progress of education was very slow and the proportion of the educated was very small
comparing the dimensions of society. In fact, the British masters had counted on the inevitable process of a gradually filtering down of Western influence. But these expectations were not fulfilled. The Western-type urban middle class people were simultaneously being cut off from their rural and traditional moorings. They were coming to look down upon elders in the family, poorer relations and persons educated and brought up in the traditional way. The Western educated youngsters, therefore, looked and lived like strangers among their own people and yet they were proud of it and boasted of their supposed superiority. Hence a socialist Kewal Motwani points out "our education is another focal point for cultural assault from the West. Macaulay consigned all our literature, religious, philosophical, sociological, etc. to the wastepaper basket and gave India a system of education that has blunted our edge of discrimination and robbed us of the capacity of being Indians. He had one method of educating India and that was denationalisation of India's elite, breaking up their nationalistic pride and morale, and treating them to the flesh pots for Western culture, and thus preparing the rule of the conquering rest through such renegades."

The influence of education was further enhanced with the printing press and the starting of newspapers. Here also writers in Indian languages played the role of the rubber stamp and spread what was published in English to the wider public in their own language. This had a mixed reception from
different sections of the people and led to the widening of what is known the generation gap. Yet other agencies at work for the spread of education were the Christian Missionaries, Indian Social Reformers and the British Government. At an earlier stage education, as a part of religious culture of the Hindu society, was administered and influenced by Brahmins and trained the pupil to accept the existing caste structure and religious belief of society. Among the Muslims it generated respect for traditional authority and Koranic Law. There was one difference between Hindu and Muslim education. While Hindu schools were designed for the upper classes of the community and excluded secular instruction, Muslim schools were open to all who confessed that there was only one God and that Mohamed was his prophet and they also admitted secular instruction. In contrast with these, the Christian Missionaries ultimately aimed at religious conversion. But it must be accepted that they did splendid and extensive work in the spread of modern education - which also improved political and economic status of the pupils and served the administrative needs of the Government - and they also provided liberal social facilities by starting hospitals, orphanages and improving the lot of the converted. The blessings of the Western education were also thus mixed up with personal and social additions on economic and political plane. On the other hand, they en­gendered a conflict within traditional society between the elders who were in position of privilege and the youngsters.
who were the beneficiaries of the Missionary education. The Missionary educational institutions produced not only 'clerical assistants to be employed in government service and commercial office but also lawyers well versed in the modern legal systems, doctors trained in modern medical science, technicians equipped with modern industrial knowledge and teachers trained in modern subjects and methods of instruction.'

It is natural that the British, like Macaulay believed their system to be the best, calculated to pave the way for the ultimate social and political unification of the World and serve the cause of the peace among men. Some British Statesmen like Mount Steuart Elphinston even believed that enlightenment brought about by education would reconcile Indians to British Rule and cultivate a sense of attachment to it. It was certainly an additional factor likely to cement the foundation of their rule.

Indian social reformers from Raja Ram Mohan Roy onwards made their contribution to the spread and influence of English education on the minds of Indians. Raja Ram Mohan Roy regarded English education as the key to a treasure of democratic thought of the modern West. There were two distinct trends of thought with regard to British type of education to be imparted to Indians. While Macaulay advocated the out and out substitution of Western culture in place of the traditional Indian culture, there were others who advocated encouragement of Sanskrit and Arabic literature. The difference was also
With regard to the medium of instruction. The latter held that even if the Western education was to be imparted it could reach the mass of people if imparted through the Indian languages. It was Macaulay and his supporters who ultimately won the battle and the British system of education was formally planted on the Indian soil. A series of Indian social reformers starting with Raja Ram Mohan Roy wholeheartedly supported it as they thought that it was the only way of bringing about social and religious reform. Indian socio-religious reformers attacked polytheism, meaningless mechanistic soul deadening religious rites and religious dogmas undermining the critical intellectual powers of the people. Though religious in form, they were national in content. It amounted to renaissance of Indian society. In a way reawakening is rational spirit and bringing it to date with modern developments, the Brahmo Samaj under the leadership of Raja Ram Mohan Roy attacked the caste system, the Sati system, child marriage and advocated widow re-marriage and equal rights for women with men. The methods employed were education, persuasion, discussion and even legislation. The Arya Samaj, on the other hand, advocated a simplification of social organisation and reform of the caste system on a functional basis. Knowledge and fitness was to be basis of the new classification and flexibility and mobility were to characterise the reformed caste organisation. It did oppose the hereditary basis of the caste and held on to the basis of
merit instead of birth. It also preached equal rights for men and women, aimed at improving the Hindu society by destroying sub-caste and make Hindu Society more dynamic and effective in social and political life. It preached the worship of one God, criticised image worship, discouraged performance of rituals though beheld religious ceremonies as enjoined in the text of Vedas, abolition of untouchability, emancipation of women, not only re-conversion but even the conversion of non-Hindus to the Hindu fold and education through the medium of Sanskrit or Hindi. The Prarthana Samaj was a similar movement towards liberalism, though in a different degree. All these movements brought about a further awakening in the younger elements of Hindu Society in the wake of Western education. The British Government, though formally guiding on the Queen's proclamation and thus committed to a policy of non-committal with regard to social and religious role, indirectly lent a helping hand to bringing about such changes. Individual British Officers were sympathetic to religious and social reform movements and appreciated the efforts made by Indian leaders. They even introduced certain legislative measures calculated to promote social reform but did not press them when they were opposed by political leaders for they did not want to estrange and alienate the bulk of traditional Hindu society and weakened the foundation of their rule. There was a curious combination of two types of leaders, especially in Western India. Those who were socially
progressive, were politically moderate. Men like Ranade, Gokhale, Agarkar were instances of this type, whereas Tilak represented those who were politically extremists but socially conservative. This is how Indian National Congress, which was essentially wedded to a political ideal, was kept distinct from the social conference which, however, held its sittings on the same occasion and at the same place as the former.

This is the general nature of the impact of Western education on Indian society and culture in the age into which Premchand was born. It would equally be interesting to study the economic and political transitions characterising this age.

In the Shanti Parv of the Mahabharat Bhisma made a generalisation which is true of all times e.g. Raja Kasyasya Karmam. In answer to a question by Udhisthir whether it is the ruler that influences society and the age or whether he is influenced by it, Bhisma categorically stated that it was the ruler who was 'the cause of time' that is to say the determining influence. This is seen to be true about the influence which the British rulers exercised in India in the 18th and 19th century.

As stated earlier, the British first came to India as traders and during the reign of Jehangir established trade posts at Bombay, Madras and Calcutta. Taking advantage of
the weakness and dissensions among small principalities and adoptive diplomatic means they worked their way up to become rulers of the country. The first landmark in this march was the battle of Plassey when they acquired jurisdiction over the 24 Parganas. In 1764 they brought Avadh under control as a result of the battle of Buxar. The major challenge to their power which came from the Marathas in the West was also overcome with the defeat of Bajirao Second in 1780. When they proceeded to obtain Diwani that is revenue rights in Bihar in the second Sikh War fought in 1846, they extended their sway to the Punjab. Lord Dalhousie’s policy of stationing contingent forces marked further rapid advance in the acquisition of power and failure of the Indian revolt of 1857 actually resulted in transfer of power to parliament.

Entrenched as the rulers of the country the British lost no time in digressing in their toes in the land. They introduced a network of railways and established a system of communication. They built roads to facilitate transport and organised post and telegraphs. They organised revenue system in different parts, set up courts for the administration of justice and introduced a faint semblance of democracy by associating Indians slowly in various fields of administration. Indians had been made eligible for service under the East India Company in 1833 though in practice they were hardly given any posts but a system of competitive examination for civil service was subsequently introduced in 1853 although the
examination was held in England and the age at which students could compete was reduced from 21 to 19 by Lord Salisbury. In 1870 a limited number of Indians began to be nominated to the Indian Civil Service. Lord Ripon introduced the Ilbert Bill extending equal treatment to Indians and Englishmen in the sphere of criminal jurisdiction. But the bill was defeated because of European opposition and Indians were disillusioned about the so-called impartiality of the British administration. Superior posts continued to be reserved for the White and Indians had to be contented to limit their ambitions to subordinate situations. Lord Lytton sought to muzzle rousing vernacular press. He also introduced the Arms Act depriving practically Indians of the right to bear arms and further discriminated between Indians and Englishmen. Judiciary and the Executive which were separated at an earlier stage were combined leading to greater tyranny.

Between 1857 and 1870 there had been two Anti-British movements - the revolt of 1857 and the smaller revolt by Vasudev Balwant Phadke - whose aim was to overthrow the British Government with an armed revolt but both were ruthlessly suppressed. The wasteful Afghan War further roused Anti-British feelings. Then there were famines taking a heavy toll of lives all over the country and underlining the fact that it was not so much the scarcity of food grains and the lack of means to buy food which was responsible for this disaster. It was to mollify the popular feeling that a Darbar was organised at Delhi at
at which Queen Victoria assumed the title of Empress of India. Thus a rigid revenue system, a costly and dilatory judicial system, oppressive police action and failing administration on the fundamental liberties to the people aroused discontent especially among the younger people receiving education at the recently started universities but not getting enough openings by way of jobs in government service and a cumulative result of this, so far as political factors were concerned, was the establishment of the Indian National Congress in 1885. Even this was characterised as a safety valve for giving vent to the feeling of unrest and discontent.

It has to be conceded that liberal education of the Western type given in the schools and colleges and the universities and acquaintance with the growth and working of the democratic institutions in England vetted the appetite for freedom and encouraged the political struggle. Educated Indians who had read about the War of American Independence, the French Revolution, the Irish Struggle for Freedom and progressive parliamentary reforms felt obviously encouraged to press their claims. There was thus a leaven democracy and nationalisation in the political movements started hereafter. The leaders aimed at evolving an Indian Nation politically free, economically developing and socially progressive but they also realised that this could not be done by sudden violent action but only by continued persistent constitutional efforts.
From 1861 to 1909 the British policy of gradually increasing Indian participation received enthusiastic support from Indians. This was because as a result of English education, educated middle-class Indians had become English in taste, in opinions and behaviour and morals and in interest. The Advisory Councils created by the British to which they appointed agreeable Indians were, however, very limited in scope and more or less ineffective for their role. Certain matters of administration were beyond their control and they were not even permitted to discuss them. Nomination to these Councils was a kind of reward offered to those who had remained loyal to the British during the hard times of 1857. So far as their mental make-up was concerned, they seemed mostly to have fulfilled Macaulay's anticipations. Of course, while Macaulay had characterised the would be generation in an undisguised expression, the words which British used in the course of policy documents were more guarded and polite.

It has already been said that the judicial organisation established by the British was administered according to modern democratic concepts which included equality of all citizens before the law irrespective of caste and creed and so far as Indians were concerned the British seemed fair to all parties but in their administration the British Rulers had in their mind and did show in their action discrimination, especially against those whom they suspected to be likely to be troublesome.
They introduced a graded service (subordinate, provincial and all-India) and took care to see that in the all-India services hardly any Indians worth the salt could be admitted. So far as village and district administration was concerned, the British did introduce basic political and administrative unity within British India. The little discontent that was felt by those who were not satisfied with the system was allowed to be canalised through resolutions and recommendations of non-official political organisations like the Indian National Congress and the characterisation of the Indian National Congress at this stage as a safety valve seems to be justified.

It can never be forgotten that originally the British came as a trading company created by a charter at home and propagating interests of British traders wherever it went and worked. This charter was transplanted on British administration as well. Thus British conquest differed from the conquest of previous rulers like the Mughals in the sense that the British could never identify themselves with the real economic interests of their subjects. The Mughals had after all made this country their home and there was no extraterritorial loyalty left in their politics or administration. Hence while earlier conquests brought about little or no important changes in the economic life of India, British conquests could not but result in the destruction of the time-honoured independent economic basis of Indian society.
Now the earstwhile self-sufficient cooperative village community knit closely as an integral part of the administration began to break. Old equilibria between industry and agriculture was inevitably and irretrievably altered on account of the introduction of the British made goods into the Indian market. Later economic studies have shown how traditional and handicrafts and village industries were destroyed and artists and artisans approved it and how the weaker sections suffered at their hands in the half a century which followed the consolidation of British power in 1858. Now new forces of capitalist production were introduced as they were bound to result in new social classes and new problems, especially in the North where landlordism (Zamindari) had been having habitual feature. The emergence of a growing middle-class equipped with education shifting from the village to the town and from agriculture to industry became visible, and in its wake came new economic-social problems such as the break-up of the traditional joint family, the setting up of the new model family in towns and creation of new social problems which have been indicated earlier in this chapter.

Prior to the advent of the British, the village was more or less a self-sufficient unit of administration and it had its own officers. The hereditary head-man known as Patel was the most important figure in the village. He maintained order, collected land revenue, performed small
magisterial duties and held a lot of land as payment for his services. The village accountant known as the Patwari kept entire accounts and records. The village watchman called the Chowkidar reported crime and arrested offenders while village Panchayat, consisting of elders of the village represented major communities, functioned as the role of arbitration and even maintained all the enforced customs. All these agencies served to hold the village together. As has been pointed out by a scholar, "The compact village scattered holdings and the communal region of the open field dominated the rural life of India. The village communities were far widespread and enduring and the common pasture, the peasants' right of grazing cattle, cutting fuel and the communal control of wood-land pastures and irrigation channels persisted in the country." (5)

As Professor D.R. Gadgil has rightly observed, "It was not until 1850 that the volume of Indian foreign trade began to increase rapidly as a result of the improvement of ocean steamers and extension of roads in the interior. The fifties saw the beginning of railway enterprise in India. The latter part in the decade witnessed large accessions to the territory directly under British rule and also the disappearance of the East India Company and the transfer of the Indian Government to the Crown. This was an eventful decade indeed and the changes that were heralded by so many important events were to be of an enormous important in the economic history of India." (4)
There was another aspect of paramount importance in the situation. The British wanted to make defence arrangements secure and constructed several roads mainly for military purposes and feeders for the great railway system. The first obvious effect of railways was that they made communications quicker and long journeys cheaper but another equally important effect was it brought in a class of general casual labourers, almost unknown before in India. Such a class was not existent because earlier there was no demand for it. In old times the useful shorter roads were mostly built through the cooperation of the local people. The Public Works Department was established by Lord Dalhousie which meant the provision and employment opportunities to a very large number of ordinary unskilled labourers throughout the country. The classes from which these labourers were recruited were mainly the traditionally working classes. Now the poor class of cultivators was glad because it had an opportunity to supplement its income during off seasons which resulted in increasing its earnings.

Since 1875 the Government of India embarked upon a policy which entailed more and more expenditure on military forces and establishments and consequently the burden of taxation became more and more pressing on the masses. The judicial system which had been adopted gave the moneylenders a greater power over his debtor and thus initiated a gradual transference of land from the cultivator to the moneylender.
Ultimately the condition of agriculture towards the end of this period was one of extreme poverty.

The effects of the opening up of the country to foreign trade was the decay of all indigenous industries. The factory system replaced handicrafts. The Bombay Weaving and Spinning Company was established, and thus the first cotton mill in India was opened. Leaving aside the cotton textile industry, considerable number of persons were employed in ginning and pressing industries and the jute industry (in Bengal) and a mining industry (in Bihar).

The East India Company had prepared the road for the systematic exploitation of the country. It had conquered large territories, defeated the feudal ruling class and established British supremacy over the land. The earlier economic policy of the country laid the foundations of the antagonism between the economic interests of Great Britain and India. During this period the Company took away from this country as much wealth as it could through the trade. Through its land policy the Company gave legal sanction to some of the worst features of the feudal order; thus in Bengal, Bihar and the United Provinces the peasant was deprived of his proprietary rights in land which were transferred to big landlords, most of whom were rent collectors and had no claims whatsoever to have lands in their possession. The Zamindari tenure created a great dissatisfaction among the peasants. The revenue fixed by Government was exorbitantly
high and the Zamindars extorted whatever they could from the cultivators. If the Zamindars failed to pay the revenue, their lands were taken away and auctioned to the highest bidders. Thus the land taxes increased rapidly and the heavy taxation by Government soon hastened the economic deterioration of the peasantry. Added to these were trade monopolies and political corruption in the East India Company which also transferred large sums of money annually to Great Britain.

**Destruction of indigenous industries**

The growth of the industrial capitalism in Britain marked a departure in the economic policy of British Imperialism. It now aimed at the systematic destruction of indigenous industries in order to turn collieries into markets for British goods, commercialisation of Indian agriculture and supplying raw materials to British industries. This was carried out in the interest of the British Government but it had farreaching consequences. The ruined artisan class now overcrowded agricultural occupation increasing the pressure of population on land and deteriorating still further the economic condition of the peasantry which was over-taxed by Government. It was also in the interest of the British Rulers to make agriculture the sole occupation of the Indian people in order to secure good food and raw material for exports.
Commercialisation

Commercialisation of Indian agriculture went on side by side with the decline of Indian industries. The growing demand for raw materials like cotton, jute and oil seeds by Great Britain required improvement in transport methods. The peasants were obliged to sell their raw materials and produce at low prices to the middle-men like wholesellers, exporters, etc., who seen resorted to money lending. Similarly, having destroyed the old handicraft industries, they curbed the growth of modern industry and subsequently British industrialists achieved a certain amount of industrialisation and forced on the country a policy which weakened India's export trade and increased the cost of living.

Thus a new type of economy came into existence for the first time. In it the Government created a new land tenure system on a private property basis and introduced money economy. A uniform system of law created land relations and transactions for its sale, purchases, etc. All produce in the country became a commodity production which linked India ultimately with the world market. There also came into existence a uniform currency system and newly enacted laws established new relations between tenant and landlord, employee and employer. Education now became the state responsibility. Thus the entire system underwent a change in all fields.

From the time England acquired political power in India, she took calculated moves to destroy indigenous
industries by forcing the so-called British free trading on India; by imposing heavy duties on Indian manufactures; by encouraging exports of raw materials from India; by manipulating custom duties in the interest of Britain; by economically motivated construction of railways and roads in India and by granting special facilities amounting to privileges to the British in India.

Thus new system had its own disastrous results. The increasing burden of land revenue and rents weighed on the tenants. The decline in handicraft and artisan industries increased overpressure on agriculture and agricultural depression seriously affected the farmers, increasing indebtedness among them. Severe famines like that of 1877 led to great discontent and resulted in peasant riots. Government primarily interested in the Lancashire Textile Industry removed import duties on cotton goods, yet another step against Indian economic interests.

Thus the entire economy in India harnessed to serve the ends of imperialist exploitation led to disastrous results for India. Indebtedness among farmers, growing unemployment among workers and discontent among intellectual middle-classes were different phases of it and yet certain vested interests were maintained at the expense of poverty stricken masses. There were thus bound to be inner conflicts, the peasantry thrown at the mercy of landlords. The few educated employed were indifferent to the interests of the
common people. The urban importer callous to the interests of the local producer and the Anglophile section, which had superiority complex, basically opposed to the patriotic element. All these conflicts are portrayed in literary works like those of Premchand.
CHAPTER - 2

References

5. Ibid Page 17.