Infanticide and the inferior position of women in society were among the two major social evils that could be identified on the eve of the establishment of the British Agency in Ludhiana. Together they undermined the place of women in society to a degrading level. This chapter details the background of their incidence and spells out how the British attempted to eradicate these evils.

INFANTICIDE.

Infanticide is defined as the murder of an infant after birth. This was a custom widely practised during the centuries preceding the establishment of the Political Agency in Ludhiana (1810). Primarily, female infants were killed at birth. The origins of this practice are not easy to ascertain. It was prevalent in Ludhiana and the adjoining areas. According to an official report there were, "hundreds of families among whom not a single female child" had been


alive for generations.\(^1\)

**PREVALENCE OF INFANTICIDE.**

Infanticide prevailed amongst the Rajputs, especially those who inhabited the North West parts of Ludhiana district, the tensildari division of the Jagraon area and the villages of Thanesur, and along the banks of the Suk.\(^2\) It is interesting to note that even Muslim Rajputs resorted to this practice.\(^3\)

Among the non-Rajputs it was practiced to a slightly milder degree. They would let the first one or at most two of their daughters live, but the subsequent ones were not allowed to survive. They were actuated exclusively by pecuniary motives. Marriage expenses were exorbitant\(^4\) and either the father's fortunes or the daughter's life had to be sacrificed, the choice lay with the father. Thus daughters became family calamities and more than one or at most two were allowed to live.\(^5\)

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1. Extract from a Letter to the Secretary to the Governor-General to the Secretary, Chief Commissioner Punjab. F.P.C.No.185-190, Sept. 9th, 1853, Also in F.P.H.C. Paper 8053, Vol.XVII. 1823.


5. F.P.C.No. 185-190, Sept. 9th, 1854.
A very interesting reason lay behind the survival of the first one or two daughters. To receive 'Kanyadaan' (gift of the virgin) was, according to the scriptures, not considered meritorious, while on the other hand to give Kanyadaan was one of the most beneficial deeds a man could perform. Consequently it was generally viewed as meritorious among the Hindus, to rear a daughter and give her away in marriage. This was considered necessary for every Hindu who was himself married.

Among the Sikhs two main families, the Bedis and the Sodhis practised the killing of infant girls. The Bedis were the chief sacerdotal class in the Punjab and Sodhis were their collaterals. They were colloquially referred to as the "Kuree Mar" or daughter slayer class. On being questioned by the British Officials they even admitted to the crime. There were altogether more than three thousand families in these classes. They felt that they were the direct descendants of Guru Nanak. It was an indignity to marry their daughters into any less holy a family. Hence the practice of Infanticide. There was not a single female child among them and from their own account they had observed this practice for several hundred years.

2. Loc. Cit.
3. Loc. Cit.
4. *Letter from John Lawrence to Agent to Governor-General*, P. P. C. No. 973-82, Dec 26th, 1845.
ORIGIN OF INFANTICIDE.

The most obvious reason for infanticide was the fact that the marriage of a daughter brought with it a great deal of expenditure. Most of the parents could not afford the expense required. Rajputs, Sikhs or Hindus all celebrated a marriage with great pomp. Each competed with his neighbours in the magnificence of marriage ceremonies generally undermining all his resources. He went into debt and sometimes almost became bankrupt. If he was unable to do all that was required, he considered it a disgrace. Rather than suffer such a predicament, he put his infant daughter to death. The poor, unable to avoid all the expense and outdo their neighbours preferred not to have daughters. The rich preferred to kill their daughters rather than waste money on lavish marriages.

Among the Bedis the origin of female infanticide is said to go back to Guru Nanak's times. It was first enjoined on the tribe by Dharam Chand Bedi, grandson of Guru Nanak. He had two sons and one daughter. The latter was espoused to the son of a Khatri. The Khatis were of a lower caste than

1. S.P.O.C., p. 405.
2. Loc. Cit.
3. Loc. Cit.
   Also in P.O.R.C., Vol. XVIII, 1823, No. 3053, p. 71.
the Bedis. But as Bedis could not marry into other Bedi families, their daughters had to be given in marriage to the sons of lower caste families.

However, during this particular marriage, the bridegroom's family insulted the Bedi family in many ways. That an allegedly inferior caste had the audacity to insult the Bedis, could not be countenanced by them. Dharm Chand is said to have laid the inhumane injunction on his descendants that it future no Bedi should allow a daughter to survive her birth. The burden of responsibility would be on his head and on no one else's. From that day on the Bedis, are said to have continued to murder their infant daughters. The evil practice spread among the Sohias, who were their collaterals. If anyone would preserve a daughter he was excommunicated.

There was one "Punjab Singh" an educated man, who declared that the Granth Sahib contained no authority for this practice, he preserved two daughters who were born to him. For this he was excommunicated by the head of the Bedis. Only his own immediate family continued having relations with him, otherwise he was treated as an outcaste.

Another authentic cause for infanticide was to prevent the daughter from undergoing a rigorous widowhood in case

1. Loc. Cit.
3. Loc. Cit.
her husband died. Widows had to have their hair shorn-off. They were not allowed to remarry. Throughout their lives they could only wear white clothes, no matter how young, and were not allowed to wear any jewellery or any other adornments. They were supposed to mourn throughout their lives for their dead husbands. In many cases of child widows this was indeed a great sacrifice and drudgery for their whole life. To avoid such a predicament parents killed their infant daughters.

A few legends have also come down regarding the origins of this practice. There is an historical legend of Mirza and Sahiban. Sahiban, a daughter of the Punjabi Syals, eloped with Mirza, the Khasal, she was however overtaken, by the members of the tribe to which she belonged, and, murdered. The subsequent feuds which took place between the two tribes were so severe and had such disastrous results, that it was felt unlucky to have daughters. It was through the daughter, of that tribe, that all the trouble had resulted. Thus an extensive practice arose of strangling female infants at birth, in case one of them might meet the fate of Sahiban.

Another story prevalent as to the origin, was a prophecy made by a Brahman to one Dusep Singh, a Rajput king, that his

4. Loc. Cit.
race would lose its sovereignty through one of his female posterity. To prevent such a thing from happening female babies were sacrificed. 1

It was also believed that many of the early Muslim invaders had demanded the daughters of the Rajput kings in marriage. To prevent such an event from happening the Rajputs maintained that their daughters were killed at birth. But fearful of the consequences in case they were discovered, the practice of infanticide originated and had since become common usage. 2

METHODS OF INFANTICIDE.

Infanticide was resorted to surreptitiously. 3 Purdah (or keeping women secluded in the house) was a common custom. The women of higher families did not go out and were not seen moving about. Those belonging to the lower classes remained confined during the last months of pregnancy. Any method could be used to kill the infant. 4

For quite sometime the British Officers' enquiries on this subject proved futile, and it was not possible to ascertain

2. Ibid., p. 137. Also in Katheja, Pt. K. L., Memorandum of Female Infanticide, House Dept., Public Consultation No. 96-98, Aug. 20th, 1860.
3. Ibid., p. 105.
4. Loc. Cit.
the means employed for the act. But gradually, a few
lambardars and nailiards acted as informants and were able
to report the methods resorted to. The child was sometimes
destroyed immediately after birth, either by filling its
mouth with cow-dung, or by immersing the head in cow's milk
or by drawing the umbilical cord over the face preventing
respiration. Any of these acts would result in immediate
death. Sometimes the baby was buried alive in an earthen
pot, or a small pill of opium was administered. Alternatively,
opium was rubbed on the mother's nipples so that the infant
was unconsciously imbibing poison with the milk which should
have given her life.

BRITISH INFLUENCE.

It is to the credit of the British that effective steps
were taken on the establishment of their rule to prohibit
infanticide. The Ludhiana district especially Ludhiana city
and the neighbouring areas had been subject to the gradual
permeation, though a very nominal amount, of British influence,
from 1809 onwards.

1. Minute on Female Infanticide, F.S.C.(F.C.C.),1853,
No.159,60. Also in S.F.C. p. 407.
3. Loc. Cit.
4. Loc. Cit.
AGENCY PERIOD.

Though during the period 1810-1846, the British agents did not pass any administrative or executive laws they did issue proclamations¹ expressive of their abhorrence of the crime. They also used all their influence to discourage infanticide in these regions. The inhabitants were generally aware that the British held infanticide to be a crime. However, no orders for punishment were issued as the British avoided as far as possible any direct interference with local custom. This was done so as not to alienate the people. So infanticide continued, but not as openly as it had before. There is evidence corroborating this fact.² A letter from a friend in Ludhiana written to me in the year 1812 says, 'the horrible custom of murdering female infants is very common. One of them - a Rajput had been induced by the tears of his wife to spare the life of a daughter born to him. The girl grew up but had not been demanded in marriage by anyone. The Rajput began to apprehend danger of disgrace on the family and resolved to prevent it by putting her to death'.

MISSIONARY INFLUENCE.

In the earlier years, more than the influence of the British was the influence of the teachings of the American

¹ Minute on Female Infanticide, F.P.C., F.C., 9th, Sept. 1853, Nos. 185-186.
missionaries. The missionaries (Presbyterian Church) had established themselves in Ludhiana by 1834-35 and began proselytising among the people. They instilled into them ideas of righteousness, goodness and truthfulness. Murder was an act which would take a person to hell. Gradually, realisation dawned, and began to have some impact. But it was not a sudden or immediate reaction. In 1836 a Rajput estimated that 20,000 females in the Punjab were destroyed annually.

Widespread teaching of the missionaries gradually awakened the people to the cruelty of the practice, slowly public opinion too underwent a change and helped to view the practice as reprehensible. Though this helped to a great extent in changing the attitude of a few people among groups, it did not result in any substantial decrease in the incidence of the crime.

POST-ANNEXATION PERIOD.

Immediately after the Anglo-Sikh war when the Bedis came into direct contact with the British Sir John Lawrence warned them that the British Government would "never permit

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them to continue the custom. In a letter to the British Agent, he wrote, "I am convinced that not a single acre of the jaghiras and other rent-free lands would continue to be with them, and that in every case where the crime was proved, assuredly he would suffer the extreme penalty of the law. I urged Baba Bikram Singh the head of the Bedis and their religious guide begging of him to use his influence in preventing the continuance of the practice. He replied he had no power to prevent it. I replied urging him to assemble his brethren to put a stop to the commission of the crime." ¹

Sir John Lawrence also suggested the means of discontinuing the practice. "All Bedis should be informed by proclamation of the determination of the government to confiscate the property, real and personal of any of them who shall be proved guilty of infanticide as well as of the penalties which attach to murder." ²

The British Officials were convinced about the paramount need to take effective steps against the continuation of infanticide. ³ Correspondence continued between several persons involved in this, H.B. Edwards, R. Montgomery, and Sir J. Lawrence. The following suggestions were sent to the Governor

¹ Letter from John Lawrence to Agent Governor-General.
F.Sc. No. 79-82, Dec. 26th, 1848.

² Loc. Cit.

³ Montgomery, R., Minute on Female Infanticide, No. XVI., Judicial Commissioner, in 3.F.C. p. 411.
General to initiate steps to prevent infanticide.\(^1\)

1. Proclamations denouncing the crime be issued throughout the Punjab, and the determination of government to punish all those practising it be made very apparent.

2. The heads of the villages in which infanticide was prevalent should be called from time to time to give information about the crime in the areas under their jurisdictions, under the penalty of being deposed from the village management.

3. An annual census of the inhabitants of all the villages and tribes who were known to practice infanticide should be taken distinguishing all male and female children.

4. A general meeting of the heads of tribes and classes known to practice infanticide should be held at Amritsar at the Diwali festival to discuss the subject of inter-marriages and to draw up the rules for guidance.\(^2\)

Accordingly, the Governor-General issued orders to the Chief Commissioner of the Punjab to hold a meeting of the type suggested and to work out a schedule according to which a law could be promulgated.

A meeting was held at Amritsar in 1855, and heads of

\(^1\) Loc. Cit.

\(^2\) Ibid., p. 412e
the princely states and heads of different tribes and classes who practised infanticide were invited. It was also attended by some British officers along with, Raja Dina Nath, Raja Sahib Dyal, Raja of Alovalla, Raja Tej Singh, Nawab Sheikh Imam-ud-din and Pandit Makandar. 1 Raja Deena Nath and Raja Sahib Dyal presided over the deliberations. Sirdar Simsher Singh, and Mehtab Singh respectively, were the representatives of the noble Sidhawala and Majithia families. Sardar Kipal Singh Maloi and Haridit Singh Badania, with Sardar Joda Singh, guided the deliberations of the Jat and Sikh fraternities. Nawab Imam-ud-din Khan, along with others, looked after the Muslim interests.

As a result of this elitist and enlightened gathering, a memorandum emerged, duly signed and attested. The memorandum laid down well-graduated scales of marriage expenditure for different castes and communities whose interests were involved. A maximum, as well as minimum expenditure was fixed, along with all details of charges, fees, gratuities, and incidental expenses of marriage feasts. 2

A general resolution was adopted by the Rajputs, Sikhs and other classes expressing their horror of infanticide and pledging their determination to co-operate with the British Government to suppress it. 3

1. Loc. Cit.
2. Chart on expenditure, see Appendix.
The personal influence of the British officers, the knowledge that they took a keen interest in the matter, a desire of the people to stand well in the eyes of the rulers and lastly the fear of punishment helped immensely in reducing the crime.  

Apart from that, the personal interest taken by the Governor-General was a great factor in lessening the occurrences. Inter-alia he asked the Chief Commissioner of the Punjab, that,

"Every Bedi family which received a pension from the Government should hold it only on condition of pledging itself to the abandonment of this family reproach. The Governor-General's Council is also prepared to sanction any rewards or honours of even titles upon a few of those who may have been forward in abandoning the practice."

From the above it is apparent that the British Government made its intentions very clear to the people, especially to the higher classes who they thought would influence their communities.

In 1864, the British Government passed an act laying down rules to be followed for the suppression of female

2. Letter from Governor General to Chief Commissioner, Punjab. F.eP.C.No.185-200, April,19th, 1854.
infanticide.\textsuperscript{1} This was a singular step which went a long way in preventing the crime. Once the act was passed, measures were taken to ensure its enforcement.

Watchmen were ordered to give information of the birth of a female child at the police station. Thamadars (policemen) went to the house and saw the child. Then he informed the magistrate, an order was decreed that after a month the health of the newborn child must be reported. The watchmen were further bound to give information of any illness or attack on the child. Thereafter a senior police official went to the village to see the child, and send a report to the magistrate. In suspicious cases the body of the child was sent for and submitted to the civil surgeon.\textsuperscript{2}

The people realised that the government meant to take stringent measures if they did not stop committing the crime. A gradual change in their attitude was noticeable. This is corroborated by the figures revealed in a census taken by Major Edwardes in 1866 in the Jagaroon pargana. Out of a total of seventy births (thirty-eight boys and thirty-two girls), thirty-three boys and sixteen girls were alive.\textsuperscript{3} This could be because of infant mortality. But it seems improbable that the

\textsuperscript{1} Home Deptt. Police, Cons. July 10th, 1865, Nos. 20-22, Rules for the suppression of female infanticide Notification Nos. 2161, Dec. 8th, 1864. For in text see Appendix.

\textsuperscript{2} Loc. Cit.

\textsuperscript{3} F.P.G. Nos. 195-200, Sept. 29th, 1866.
mortality rate was high only amongst girls. It was more probable that infanticide was still in prevalence though the incidence was less British efforts to curb this practice were bearing results in a small way.

In an official report of 1864-65 it was stated that, "there are reasons to believe that female infanticide is not yet extinct and is still practised by some of the higher Jat tribes and by the Rajput Families." A census of boys and girls taken by the Deputy Commissioner of the district in a group of villages suspected of the crime gives interesting results. It showed that while the crime had certainly decreased, it had not been fully eradicated. The report elaborated that no female infants were killed at birth but were allowed to die from neglect and malnutrition. The crime continued though in a different manner.

The British authorities made those who were suspect aware that they were under constant surveillance and suspicion. A plan was also evolved to reward all those who would inform the authorities of the murder of any girl. This temptation of a reward was sufficient for a neighbour to tell of a murder.

1. General Report for Administration of the Punjab, 1864-65 (Labore, 1866), p. 27.
4. Loc. Cit.
As a result, each man was wary of reports leaking to the
British and out of fear dared not kill his daughter. ¹

In 1863 another report ² was issued on the census of
that year. From that it is further evident that female
infanticide, though reduced, was still prevalent among the
communities (Sikh, Hindu, Jat and Rajput) formerly suspected
of it. The Census Officer (Denzil Ibbetson) toured the
areas where he felt it was in existence especially the Jagraon
tehsil of Ludhiana ³ and confirmed that incidences of
infanticide still occurred.

Inspite of the fact that stringent measures were
taken to enforce the act against infanticide, the crime was
not fully abolished. Even in the year 1882, there were some
cases of infanticide reported. ⁴

But these were isolated cases. By and large infanticide
decreased, and gradually the number of females in the overall
population increased. They started being sent to school
and made a gradual appearance in the census figures also.

This result was entirely due to the laudable efforts
made by the British Government. It was through its influence

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¹ Loc. Cit.
³ Ibid., p. 59.
⁴ Home Deptt. Judicial, Consultation No. 148
   Women convicted of murdering infant children.
that there was a complete decadence of infanticide, by the end of the nineteenth century.

PLACE OF WOMEN IN SOCIETY.

As a result of British success in being able to prevent female infanticide, and to give prominence to the neglected women, a woman's status the society was to undergo a great change, a change initiated and inculcated by the British again.

The Punjabi woman, like a Bengali, or one from Bombay or U.P. or anywhere else in India, occupied a low place in the home. She was there solely to administer to the needs of her husband. She was subjected to a lower status of life. She was deprived the right to be educated, and to inherit property. Her married life was miserable. Her husband could at will commit adultery. Her mental development was crippled by child marriage.  

WOMEN IN EARLY TIMES.

In ancient times women had a better status in society. It was said that "the male and the female are like puma and prakriti, one being a complement to the other."

Weaving and needlework, household duties and watching the crops, were her main duties. Education was considered

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2. Loc. Cit.
3. Loc. Cit. mentions 'Raghuvaansa' IV.
important. In the houses as well as in the forests where education was imparted, boys and girls were taught together. Fine arts like music, dancing and painting were specially encouraged in the case of girls.

Women were not secluded. Young girls led free lives, and had a decisive voice in the selection of their husbands. Festive occasions and functions, were also attended by the girls. Women had a share in the property of their fathers. A part of ancestral property was given to them known as 'stridhana'.

It seems strange and difficult to ascertain as to why this eminent position which a woman held in early times became one of degradation after a few centuries.

It was Mann who enjoined that women were evil and a hindrance in the life of a man, and must be kept subordinate. "It was under the shadow of the great ideal of sannyasa, that the weaknesses of women were exaggerated as a warning to monks. To encourage renunciation, women were despised as the source of worldliness." 4

1. Loc. Cit.
EFFECT OF MUSLIM INVASIONS.

It might be contended that the change in the attitude towards women was a result of the Muslim invasions in the eleventh century. Women who had complete freedom of thought and movement, were secluded and kept indoors, to protect them from avaricious eyes of the Muslims. These raiders had no qualm in carrying away women as a part of their booty. To ensure against such occurrences society underwent a complete metamorphosis towards the laxity it had earlier shown to women. This is however a contention. If the change cannot be adduced to this, then there seems no other plausible explanation for the reasons bringing the vicevitude.

WOMEN IN THE EARLY NINETEENTH CENTURY.

The fate of a woman of higher families was the same as that of a woman of a lower one. There was not much difference in the two except that the one belonging to a lower grade in society would have much more work to do, than the other, who would have helping hands through whom she could execute her household chores. But basically either one's vocation in life was only to minister to her husband's pleasures and to rear his family. 1 She was considered incapable of developing any of those higher mental qualities which would develop her personality and enable her to play a more useful part in life. It was often said to a man who done a

stupid deed, that he had the sense of a woman. Women were thought to possess inferior intellects than the men or to possess none at all.

Consequently the question of imparting education to them did not arise. Uneducated, considered inferior, they grew up with the idea constantly ingrained in their minds, that men were superior and women were only there to administer to their needs. In the beginning the woman was to be obedient to her parents until she got married; then her husband was her lord and master and after him came the mother-in-law to whose discipline she must be amenable. In case of widowhood, again no respite was given her, she must obey her sons, or her husband's nearest kinmen.

The only women who received an education were those of ill-repute, who were taught to read and write, to dance and sing. They were accomplished in these fields and some were of reputed fame. Since education was associated with these dancing girls, the women of better and well-to-do families who might have been taught to read and write, thought it infringing to learn. It was considered a thorough disgrace for a respectable woman to be able to read. A woman might

1. Loc. Cit.
2. Loc. Cit.
5. Loc. Cit.
sang while going about her household chores; or at a wedding, but would not under any circumstances sing in public.

Most women were ill-treated by their husbands. Sometimes they were even beaten. But a woman had to endure all as her lot. Not only had she to abide by the ways of her husband but also those of her mother-in-law.

But on giving birth to a son, the status of the daughter-in-law became higher. She received more importance and was treated with greater respect not only by her husband but also by her mother-in-law. On the other hand, if she did not give birth to a son then her husband could take another wife. There were no religious dictates preventing such a practice, and it was common especially among the Jats to have more than one wife. Polygamy brought with it jealousy, malice and misery, but a woman had no redress and had to suffer in silence. Though this was the practice prevalent among the Jats, Hindu Law forbade a man to take more than one wife and this was uncommon among the Hindus. Hindu Law also forbade divorce, so under no circumstances could a husband and wife separate, no matter what be the exigency of the situation.

The moral gulf which existed was very great between the two sexes. Nothing was done to eradicate the feelings prevalent in the husband that his wife was just a passive object, devoid of sensibility, who must adhere to her husband's dictates and sensibilities. She was not ever looked upon as a companion. On the other hand, the woman resigned herself to the fact that she was inferior and that her husband was near to being a demi-god, her master and her lord. ¹

Her thought process was so permeated with this idea that a woman always referred to her husband with all deference and humility. Under no circumstances could she call him by his name, not even while conversing about him. Sometimes when a stranger happened to have enquired her husband's name, if unacquainted with the custom, he would have found to his embarrassment that she would have hidden her face and turned away without an answer.²

There was complete and total segregation of women and men. Two halves of the house, one for the fairer sex and the other for the males were always in existence. This was especially so among the wealthier classes who could afford large houses.³ Evening during marriage ceremonies or functions, when the women were allowed out of their seclusion they could

¹ Loc. Cit.
only mix among other women. It was against the custom in
prevalence, for men and women to talk or mix with each other
later and this was an innovation brought about by the British
influence.¹

As a corollary to total segregation, no woman was
allowed out without a veil over her face. One of the greatest
mistakes a woman could make was to let a man other than her
husband see her face.²

A woman could not take vows of celibacy.³ Subjected
on all sides to the moral ascendancy of man, the very idea
was repugnant to a society dominated by men. The thought
that through celibacy she might gain some independence was
abhorrent to the chauvinistic male of that time and was not
even given consideration.

Regarding customs prevalent between the relationship
of a wife and a husband, it would be incorrect to say that
the husband in this sphere again had predominance. A woman
could not eat with her husband and could only do so after
he had finished his meal. Very often she ate out of the same
plate.⁴ A woman was always supposed to walk behind her husband.

¹ Loc. Cit.
² Ishwari Das, Domestic manners and customs in North India,
(Benaras, 1860), p. 154-161.
³ Loc. Cit.
⁴ Ibid., p. 123.
She could not walk along side or in front and even if a husband and wife were going to the same destination they left within a few minutes of each other so that the wife walked at a respectable distance behind her husband.¹

It is apparent that the lot of women by and large was indeed miserable. It was a rare occurrence to find a marriage based on mutual love and understanding and as an exception if it did exist, the husband would be careful not to show any outward sign of affection or appreciation as it was considered improper for a man to praise his wife or give her appreciation, and in all probability he would be a subject of ridicule.

**BRITISH INFLUENCE.**

The British contribution to the uplift of women in Ludhiana and in the Punjab is indeed laudable. They brought with them the Western notions of a free woman and were directly instrumental in initiating reform in this direction.

The primary influence in this direction was through education - both male as well as female education. The next chapter describes how this influence was brought about.

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With the spread of literacy, people's attitude changed and an undercurrent spread amongst some, to the effect that women must be educated and uplifted. The emancipation of the Indian woman which is apparent today essentially found its beginning in the changes initiated by the British.