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British Raj: The Legacy of Colonialism in India

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INTRODUCTION

The imperialist conquest of India transformed Britain into a global superpower, enhancing the empire's influence to unprecedented new heights. Though the British effectively consolidated power over the Indian territories, the vast native population did not meekly acquiesce to British Raj. Throughout the 19th century, violent and non-violent struggles ensued between the colonizers and the colonized. Whereas some groups adopted the Gandhian *Satyagraha* philosophy to resist against British occupation, others engaged in revolutionary armed struggles against the White oppressors. The anti-colonial sentiments of the latter group can be encapsulated by the justification imparted by Bhagat Singh, the assassin of the English Superintendent of police and British Central Assembly bomber, at his trial before the British Crown:

> The bomb was necessary to awaken England…We dropped the bomb…to register our protest on behalf of those who had no other means left to give expression to their heart-rending agony. Our sole purpose was to make the deaf hear and give the heedless a timely warning. (Kapur 1986:17)

Distinct parallels can be drawn between Singh's radical stance against the British imperial regime, and the critique of French colonialism proffered by Fanon in his revolutionary works *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952) and *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961). In consonance with Singh, Fanon advocates for the use of violence in order to overthrow the colonial masters and bring an end to the subjugation of the colonized masses. Fanon's works reflect on the experiences of disenfranchised blacks under French domination however, his critique of colonial violence can equally be applied to understand the exploitation of Indian subjects under British Raj. Although historical accounts of British colonialism substantiate that violence was perpetrated against the Indian population, the long-term consequences of the Raj remain a contentious source of debate within the social sciences and humanities. Some scholars have

suggested that India became civilized under British Raj, whereas others indicate that Indian civilization regressed as a consequence of colonialism. Using Fanon's *Black Skins, White Masks* (1952) and *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961)*,* this paper will demonstrate that the Indian subcontinent was plagued by racism and violence prior to British encounter, and that the colonial project further problematized relations amongst the diverse Indian population. In light of the reductionist nature of classical Marxist theory, especially its tendency to demote ethnic and racial identities to the status of epiphenomena of class, a Neo-Marxist analysis of British colonialism will be propounded in the ensuing discussion (Allahar 2005:2).

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows. Section one will be used to briefly discuss the concepts of race, ethnicity, nationalism and social caste, which will be referred to throughout this paper. Section two will consider the ideological foundations of Manicheistic racism. Section three will address colonial violence and distinguish it from the intra-group and inter-group violence, which anteceded British encounter. Finally, section four will be used to draw conclusions on the legacy of British colonialism in India.

SECTION I: THE POLITICS OF IDENITY

Race, Ethnicity and Nationalism:

Before assessing Fanon's arguments in *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952) and *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961), a brief theoretical discussion pertaining to the markers of individual and group identity is in order. Throughout the various epochs of human civilization, race has arguably remained the most salient marker of identity. The term race is used to classify and differentiate between people and groups "…on the basis of certain hereditary characteristics such as blood type, genetic make-up, and phenotype or physical characteristics" (Allahar 2005:128). Race, or skin colour, must be understood in relation the sociological maxim referred to as the Thomas Principle. In the contemporary period, scientific discourse has confirmed that

races are social constructs lacking a biological or genetic basis however, humans persistently structure their interpersonal relations with each other as if they were real (Allahar 1993:67). Thus, race is an inherently ambiguous category until social meaning becomes invested into it through human thought processes (Bastide 1967:312). Nonetheless, the social constructedness of race should not detract from the fact that racial identities have inescapable consequences for their bearers. The efficacy of the Thomas Principle is demonstrated by Allahar (1993:67), who reveals that race determines resource allocation and the entitlements an individual or group enjoys within a given society.

Human populations can further be distinguished by their identification with ethnic groups. Typically, members of an ethnic group share "…a myth of common descent, memories, culture, association with a territory, and a sense of solidarity" (Allahar 2005:9). Though discernible differences exist between race and ethnicity, both terms are often used interchangeably by the lay population and within academia. As with race, ethnicity is also socially constructed however, the latter identity marker can be concealed or utilized strategically in different social contexts to appropriate resources and advantages (Allahar 2005:6). This difference is imperative considering that racial features are perpetually on display and consequently unmalleable to change. Furthermore, as noted by Allahar (2005:9), ethnic groups often identify with a nation or territory. In this way, ethnicity can be construed of as a component of nationalism. The term nationalism can be used to designate either the shared ideology of a group of people that have sovereign authority over a clearly demarcated territory, or the "…corporate sentiment of oneness held by people…without a space…to call *home*" (Allahar 2005:4; my emphasis). The political process of nation-building is inextricably linked to ethnicity, race and the differentials in power that result from membership within these groups.

Primordial Attachment and Belonging:

Members of socially constructed ethnic or racial groups experience a sense of affinity with others they share similarities with, and these similarities tend to become more pronounced when people come into contact with others they perceive to be different. Race, ethnicity and nationalism are all distinct markers of identity however, they can all be tied to the conception of primordialism. In the conventional sense of the term, primordialism refers to a myth of common descent based on shared ancestry or blood, which members of a human population claim to share. Allahar (2011:19) further distinguishes between the conventional hard primordialism based on biological or kinship ties, and soft primordialism which emphasizes the social aspect of attachment. Soft primordialism acknowledges that socially constructed identities are capable of evoking feelings of belonging sometimes as intense as consanguineal bonds (Allahar 2011:19).

Differentiating Between Social Caste and Social Class:

The social caste system, which is also based on primordial affiliation, is often used to distinguish India from other societies. Although not exclusive to India, the caste system has remained a pervasive aspect of social, political and economic life in the country since pre-historic times. Initially, the caste system was stratified on the basis of varna (colour) however, over time groups began to differentiate themselves within the established varnas and further divided themselves into sub-castes referred to as jatis (birth group). Under the jati system, an individual is ascribed their position within the social stratification hierarchy. Moreover, each jati provides a distinct moral code which regulates diet, occupation, affiliation with other sub-castes and marital endogamy (Bayly 1999:23). The earliest expressions of the social caste system are located within the ancient Vedic scriptures:

> When they divided the Purusa, into how many parts did they arrange him…The *Brahmin* was his mouth, his two arms were made the *Rajanya* [*Kshatriya*, king and warrior], his two thighs [loins] the *Vaisya*, from his feet the *Sudra* [servile class] was born. (Bayly 1999:13)

Bayly (1999:9) indicates that the most significant implication of the caste system is that people are born into, and die within the same social rank. Thus, even if an individual of untouchable birth amasses material wealth or attains occupational mobility, he or she will always remain of an inferior caste position. The Indian caste system can be contrasted to the social class system found within modern capitalist societies. In the class system, an individual's position in the social stratification hierarchy is determined by their relationship to the means of production. As opposed to the social caste system, social mobility is theoretically plausible between social classes.

SECTION II: THE IDEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS OF RACISM

Religion in Pre-Colonial India:

The economic, political and social exploitation of the Indian subcontinent was accomplished through the ideological control of the native population. In the present context, ideology refers to a coherent system of beliefs and values which allows social actors to make sense of their lived experiences (Rejai 1991:17). In pre-colonial India, knowledge and understanding were derived and structured on the basis of sacred scriptures and teachings. The Eastern religions constituted a source of social cement which bestowed a sense of identity to their adherents, and allowed them to feel a sense of belonging within the larger society (Thomson 1986:32).

This Durkheimian analysis of religion can be contrasted to Marx's understanding of religion as the "…distortion of man's being…the heart of a heartless world… [and] the opium of the suffering masses" (Bottomore 1983: 465). Commenting specifically on Hinduism, Marx

accused adherents of the Vedic scriptures of blindly accepting an ideology which was inherently oppressive (Bottomore 1983: 232). The oppressive nature of Hinduism is exhibited within the caste system which has been alluded to in the preceding section. In Hinduism, the Vedic scriptures authorize the stratification of the chaste Aryas (light conquerors) and caliginous Dasyas (dark inhabitants) in a Manichean hierarchy (Isaacs 1967:357). In the pre-colonial era, the Brahmin priests who were located at the top of the caste hierarchy, were prohibited from eating around the servile Sudras, let alone preaching to them (Bayly 1999: 123). Understood in this way, the Hindu religion facilitated the creation of a set of colour categories and accompanying logic which constrained adherents, and "…set rules of thought and behavior which [had] the power to elicit obedience" (Thomson 1986:45). Distinct parallels can be drawn between the colour symbolisms discernible in the Hindu religion, and those present in Christianity.

British Colonialism, Christianity and Manichean Racism:

The Indian population's contempt of black skin has pre-historic, Vedic roots however, the abhorrence of the dark skin pigmentation was further exasperated by the advent of British rule. The British colonial project in India was consonant with the ideology of Manicheistic racism rooted in the biblical scriptures of Christianity. Prior to the Age of Exploration, the known world was considered to be relatively small in size. Conventional wisdom suggested that physical and social deviation increased with proximity (Davidson 1992:19). Since the communities that people resided within were highly homogenous, xenophobic discourses pertaining to imagined others were disseminated habitually. These discourses took the form of fables and allegories which conceived of the barbaric inhabitants of distant lands. Over the course of imperial conquest, the British colonizers eventually encountered human populations with

"…pigmentation, hair texture, and facial features [that] differed radically from the [European] norm[s]" (Allahar 1993:42). The Christian belief in monogenesis – the idea that the lineage of all human beings can be traced back to Adam and Eve – was challenged by the intercultural encounters between the colonizers and the colonized. Since the observed phenotypic differences clashed with the ideological presumptions of Christianity, the Hamitic myth was socially constructed in order to vindicate the existence of the plinian races (Allahar 1993:46).

According to this myth, Ham was punished by God for ridiculing the drunken and disrobed Noah while he slept in his tent. Biblical explications suggest that God reprimanded Ham and his descendants by tainting their skin black and condemning them to lives of eternal servitude. Over time, this myth was detached from the original religious context and became accepted as a reality. In fact, Christians began to "…associate the idea of blackness with wrong-doing and the more sinister aspects of human existence and life in general" (Allahar 1993:47). Akin to the Hindu Sudra, the African black began to be seen as a sub-human, servile creature that lacked the capacity for freedom. The Hamitic myth demonstrates that the Christian religion has been highly malleable to change over time, although many adherents of Christianity consider biblical scripture and doctrine to be fixed. As Rejai (19:1991) suggests in *Political Ideologies,* in order to remain relevant, all ideological belief systems sustain themselves by adapting to changing circumstances. Understood in this sense, the development of the Hamitic myth was a rational response by the church to keep Christianity congruent with the lived experiences of its followers in the colonies.

As with the British colonies in Africa, Asia and the Americas, the vast populous of the Indian subcontinent was also subjected to Christian Manicheistic racism. In *Distant Sovereignty*, Sen (2002:17) reveals that in historical memoirs of English officers "…Indians were commonly

regarded as blacks or negroes… [who] were member[s] of an inferior race and natural slave[s]".

The conception of monogenesism coupled with the Hamitic myth, provided the ideological foundation of a racial hierarchy in which the white colonizers were placed "…at the summit of human achievement in terms of beauty, intelligence and civilization" (Sen 2002:121). All other races, including the Pagan Indians masses, were perceived to be repulsive deviations from the European ideal. Not only were the Indians physically revolting, but the colonizers regarded Indian customs and rituals to be morally repugnant.

The British attempted to override ritualistic practices including the Sati, in which a widow was coerced or willingly consented to being burnt alongside her deceased spouse on the funeral pyre (Singh 1974:67). Although a deplorable practice by any standard, the British colonizers made no attempt to understand its Ramayanic origins. On the contrary, they banned the practice of Sati and personally initiated the sexual exploitation of vulnerable Indian women (Sen 2002:128). During the British Raj, many stationed Englishmen took on multiple bibis (mistresses) out of wedlock to satisfy their sexual desires. It appears that the colonizers felt that only men that had white complexions possessed a valid justification for the mistreatment of Indian women.

The Epidermalization of Inferiority:

The colonizers had convinced themselves that they were carrying out a benevolent civilizing mission, and over time the Indians also began to accept this manufactured myth. In this manner, British colonial presence in India manifested into feelings of inferiority and self-hatred amongst the colonized masses. In *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952), Fanon refers to the internalization of colonial subjugation as the epidermalization of inferiority. This process is typified by the cultural obliteration of the colonized people, and the subsequent exposure of that

population to the language and norms of the civilized nation (Fanon 1952:9). In the context of colonial Indian, the epidermalization of inferiority was facilitated by the inception of the British education system, and the dissemination of Western knowledge amongst the Indian population. In the past, the colonizers had entrusted Christian missionaries with the task of acclimatization. However, in colonial India large-scale evangelical conversions were unfeasible since the Indians were highly adamant about their own religious beliefs.

Singh (1974:72), commenting on the religious resilience of the indentured Trinidadian Indians, acknowledges that the Hindus and Muslims felt great pride in "…their cultural backgrounds and had enough intellectual capacity to meet missionaries in equal terms". Following the Sepoy Mutiny of 1857 and the eventual downfall of the East India Company, the British Raj had become cognizant that overtly challenging the beliefs of the Heathen Indians was counter-intuitive to British economic interests (Sen 2002:72).The education system became the most viable means to assimilate the Indians and retain the status-quo. English not only became the medium of instruction in colonial India, it also became the vehicle through which the colonized mind was created. The curriculum was essentially designed to indoctrinate the younger generations and accolade Western culture. Acknowledging the power of language in shaping experience and understanding, Fanon (1962:9) indicates that a "…man who has a language consequently possesses the world expressed and implied by that language". Seen in this sense, the British educational institutions functioned to perpetuate a hegemonic cultural discourse. Hegemony, as used here, refers to a form of domination, whereby the ideological worldview of the elite is consensually accepted by the subjugated masses as legitimate (Bottomore 1983:231).

SECTION III: THE CONTEXT OF VIOLENCE

The Fallacy of Communal Relations and Tolerance in Pre-Colonial India:

Historical accounts of pre-colonial India substantiate that the vast subcontinent had been plagued by intense waves of inter-group (and intra-group) violence even before the arrival of the British. Indian scholars tend to overlook this period in history since they are under the false impression that conflicts were anomalous features in an otherwise harmonious society (Roy 2010:39). A starkly different representation of pre-colonial India can be garnered from Roy (2010:7), who indicates that narrative history downplays "…the violence of …Islamic invasions … [denies] any references to Hindu genocide… [or the] fundamental differences… [between the Muslims and] and the rigid, parochial and caste oriented Hindus, [which made] conflict inevitable [in the first place]". Although Roy validates that violence and religious persecution inundated pre-colonial India, it appears that violence may be interpreted differentially depending on the physical appearance of the perpetrator. Shils (1967:3; my emphasis) encapsulates this point effectively: "[t]yranny is always painful, but tyranny exercised by the ethnically alien, whose ethnic alien-ness is underscored by… distinguishable *color* difference, is especially repugnant".

Considering the rich history of conquest in pre-colonial India, violence cannot be understood as a derivative of British rule. Nevertheless, the colonizers contributed significantly to the crimson legacy of violence within the subcontinent. Documenting casualties of British Raj, Saha (2011:844) reveals that historians focus solely on extreme instances of colonial violence such as the Jallianwala Bagh massacre, and disregard the everyday pervasivity of practices like flogging and unjust detainment. Moreover, in addition to physically inflicting violence on the Indian subjects, the British also indirectly encouraged conflict between opposing groups. The

East India Company, and later the British Raj, had strategically employed a divide and rule strategy to compartmentalize and rule over the vast Indian population. Although pre-colonial India was far from unified, the colonizers either accentuated existing ethno-religious divisions or, created new ones where none had previously existed. This divide and rule strategy metamorphosized to hinder national unity and spark ethnic strife once the colonizers departed.

The Politics of Decolonization:

Recognizing the development of diverse nationalistic sentiments amongst the colonized masses, the British had become aware that they could no longer legitimately retain control over India. In 1947, after almost two centuries of imperialist domination, the British eventually succumbed to the sway of the Indian independence movement and withdrew from India. The abdication of colonial rule coincided with the implementation of the Mountbatten Partition Plan which divided British India into Muslim-controlled Pakistan, and Hindu-dominated India (Schweinitz 1983:218). Alongside the dominant, politically mobilized Hindu and Muslim nationalist groups, the Sikhs had also collaborated closely with the colonial power in partition planning (Kapur 1986:7). As a minority within the diverse region of Punjab, the Sikhs were weary that their distinct cultural and religious identity would be subsumed into Islam or Hinduism following the partition. In line with the Muslim League, the Sikhs also demanded separation from Hindu India (Pettigrew 1995:4). Nonetheless, the secessionist demands of the community did not manifest into the creation of a sovereign Sikh state. Allahar (2011:250-51) acknowledges that nation building is informed by power differentials "…[so] not all citizens…will have equal input into the definition of national…identity". The Sikh community's rampant illiteracy, coupled with their minority status, made them virtually powerless in the politics of decolonization (Kapur 1986:15).

The Relationship between Violence and Independence:

The transfer of sovereignty from the British Raj to the newly formed republics of India and Pakistan, was accompanied by an unprecedented level of sectarian violence between the Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims. An estimated one million people perished in communal riots, and over fifteen million people were uprooted from their homes (Schweinitz 1983:218). Schweinitz (1983:218) postulates that the British were responsible for the bloodbath that ensued in 1947 since they "…created [the] vested interests and jealousies that exacerbated communal enmities… [so that] when the imperial lid was lifted the explosions were worse than they otherwise would have been".

It is possible to contend that the divide and rule strategy implemented by the British transmuted into as a severe instance of what Fanon identifies as the "…collective immersion in…fratricidal bloodbath" (Fanon 1961:17). Fanon indicates that whereas the colonized subject has accepted the violence inflicted upon him (or her) from the colonial master, receiving a menacing glare from another inferior being is not received well. The colonial subject resorts to aggression since it is perceived to be a rational response to a perceived threat. However, according to Fanon (1961:17; my emphasis) these "… [i]nternecine feuds merely perpetuate age-old grudges entrenched in the memory. By throwing himself muscle and soul into his blood feuds, the colonized subject endeavors to convince himself that *colonialism has never existed*". Unaware of the real enemy, the Indians unleashed violence against one another and consequently failed to castigate the real oppressors. Moreover, the ruthless bloodshed of the Indian Partition served to reify that the Indians really were uncivilized savages. This form of collateral violence continues to erupt within the Indian subcontinent and diaspora. The Sikh secessionist movement of Khalistan is one of many examples.

Considering Khalistan: A Subjective Analysis

Khalistan, or the land of the pure, refers to the Sikh separatist movement which aims at detracting the region of Punjab away from Hindu-dominated India. Members identifying with the Khalistan movement diverge radically with regards to accomplishing separatism. The Khalistanis have engaged in large-scale civil disobedience movements aimed at increasing autonomy over Punjab, as well as guerilla warfare and terrorism. The Khalistan movement reached its zenith in the late 1970's, when the militant revolutionary Bhindranwale began a program of *Amrit Prachar* (baptisms) for the poor Jatt farmers of Punjab. Bhindranwale rallied co-ethnic Sikhs around a primordial myth in which the descendants of the divine Gurus "…were masters in their own lands" (Allahar 2011:247). The Sikh insurgent's program of ethnic entrepreneurship became so effective that it elicited a response from the Indian government. In order to apprehend Bhindranwale and put an end to Sikh separatism, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi sanctioned Operation Bluestar, and the Indian military subsequently attacked Sri Darbar Sahib (also known as the Golden Temple) in June of 1984. The attack resulted in the desecration of temporal center of the Sikhs, and an estimated 5000 civilian casualties (Kapur 1986:137). Moreover, Operation Bluestar also set into motion a destructive chain of events.

Several months after the attack on Sri Darbar Sahib, Indira Gandhi was assassinated by her two Sikh bodyguards. Following the cremation of the Prime Minister, enraged and bloodthirsty Hindu mobs, amalgamated with police and state officials, began combing through villages viciously murdering Sikh men, raping women and dismembering children (Pettigrew 1995:37). Some of my family members were amongst the deceased. In 1987, my eldest massar (my father's brother-in-law) was shot and killed by Punjab police as he sat in a restaurant reading a newspaper. In 1993, two of my chachay (my father's brothers) were also brutally murdered in a

staged police encounter in Jalandhar. Although this paper is meant to take an objective look at the effects of British colonialism (and the subsequent decolonization process), I feel that drawing upon my personal experiences as a Punjabi-Canadian can demonstrate how the after effects of decolonization continue to structure the lived experiences of members of the Sikh diaspora.

Like many Sikh migrants, my parents came to Canada with very little money. In order to amass financial capital for a brighter future, my parents raised my younger brother and I in the infamous Jane and Finch Palisades located in the northwest end of Toronto. During the 1990's, this neighborhood became a massive ethnic enclave and immigrant hub characterized by violence, gangs, crime and drugs. Aware of the social ills present within the community, my parents used religion as a *tool* to keep my brother and I from going astray. As a consequence, I kept a turban until I reached early adolescence. My physical appearance made my childhood extremely difficult and impeded my integration into mainstream Canadian society. I have very vivid memories of the verbal and physical altercations I would get into with the predominately Black students at my elementary school, and the overt and covert discrimination that I was subject to by the school administrators and teaching staff. These early experiences made it difficult for me to perceive myself as a Canadian. As a direct consequence of the racism and discrimination I experienced, I eventually cut my hair and began to distance myself from the Sikh religion.

Around this time in my life, my family also attained residential mobility and relocated to Brampton where I currently reside today. Brampton is also an ethnic enclave like Jane and Finch, but unlike Toronto's northwest end, Brampton is predominately populated by Punjabi Sikhs. In Brampton I felt a sense of belonging based on the cultural similarities I shared with the majority of the residents. Over time, I came to learn more about the history of my ancestors and I was

filled with hate and contempt for India. I became an avid proponent of Khalistani nationalism. I felt attached to an inexistent and unfeasible homeland which Anderson aptly describes as an "…*imagined* political community…imagined because…members of even the smallest nation will never know [one another]" (Cited in Thompson 1986:49; my emphasis). I have come to learn that my nationalistic sentiments, and my involvement in the Sikh diaspora, were largely a consequence of my social class position and my segmented assimilation trajectory. Allahar (2013) indicates that "history can be seen as hindsight in order to gain insight for foresight". Accordingly than, acknowledging one's history is not necessarily detrimental. However, when the acknowledgement of this history hinders the recognition of the structural inequalities produced by neo-colonial capitalism, false consciousness becomes the result. Thus, political mobilization based on race and identity not only divides and alienates oppressed persons, it also thwarts revolutionary change.

SECTION IV: CONCLUSION

In this paper, the legacy of British colonialism in India was examined using the anti-colonial discourse proffered by Fanon in *Black Skins, White Masks* (1952) and *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961). Within academia, the long-term implications of British Raj still remain a contentious source of debate. Whereas some academics perceive the colonization of India as a benevolent civilizing mission undertaken by the British, others suggest that the colonial project stagnated the economic and social development of India. This paper ascertained that pre-colonial India was afflicted by racism and violence prior to British encounter, and that the colonial project further strained communal relations between the heterogeneous Indian population.

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