

Colonialism and Imperialism as Systems in India

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.51583/IJLTEMAS.2025.1410000031>

Abstract: This paper examines **colonialism and imperialism as interrelated systems** that shaped India's political, economic, social, and cultural landscapes from the seventeenth to the twentieth century. By analysing the British colonial enterprise and its underlying imperial ideology, the study explores how domination was institutionalized through governance structures, economic exploitation, and cultural hegemony. Drawing on historical records, postcolonial theory, and economic analyses, the paper argues that colonialism in India functioned not merely as political occupation but as a comprehensive system of control designed to sustain imperial power. It highlights the mechanisms through which colonial policies restructured India's economy, disrupted indigenous industries, and redefined social hierarchies. Furthermore, the research investigates the lasting legacies of imperialism in contemporary Indian society, economy, and identity formation. Ultimately, this paper situates India's colonial experience within the broader global context of imperial systems, offering insights into how resistance movements and nationalist discourses emerged as counter-systems challenging colonial domination.

Keywords: Colonialism, Imperialism, Economy, Capitalism, Trade.

John Seeley, the Cambridge imperial historian, speaking in 1882 underlined the greatness of the British Empire 'to a fit of absence of mind': "nothing great that has ever been done by Englishmen was done so unintentionally so accidentally, as the conquest of India".¹ Henry Dodwell considered economic transition in India as 'revolutionary'. He took it 'vastly greater and more fundamental than Industrial Revolution'.² However, it was more out of optimism than the historical reading. Historians are engaged in this debate, in Imperialist and Nationalist historiography. Will Durant in his classic study *The Case for India* graphically portrayed the British rapacity in India: "the British conquest of India was the invasion and destruction of a high civilization by a trading company utterly without struggle or principle".³ The British Empire in India represented 'a watershed in relationship between India and the world economy'.⁴ The British Empire was one of the longest-lasting and institutionally most complex of colonial administrations. The purpose of the British rule in India had three aspects: to provide a market for British goods to pay interest on Sterling debt and other charges that fell due in London and to maintain a large number of British troops from Indian revenues.⁵ Lord Curzon, the Viceroy of India in 1898, put forth the idea: "India is the pivot of our Empire...".⁶ The order and stability which the British rule undeniably brought did not come cheap. *Pax Britannica* meant *Tax Britannica*.⁷ In other words, the necessity to organise the collection of land revenue punctually, the safety of trade and markets and creation of conditions of certainly and security for exchange transactions demanded the Omni-present authority of the new rulers. The British created a new state apparatus called colonial state.⁸

The age of modern colonialism began with the global expansion of trade and conquest by European powers. The objective and mechanism was basically economic. The realization of such objectives entailed a structuring of economies of the colonised societies.⁹ Colonies are dependent territories and populations that are possessed and ruled by an empire. Colonialism refers to the processes, policies and ideologies used by metropolis to establish, conquer, settle, govern and economically exploit colonies. It includes a set of formal policies, informal practices and ideologies employed by a metropolis to retain control of a colony and benefit from control.¹⁰ In other words, Colonialism is 'a conglomerate of dominant-subservient relations'. It represents a set of structures that are imposed upon a nation by another in order to effect international distribution of income and wealth.¹¹ Colonizing nations dominated the resources, labour and markets of the colonial territory.¹² Imperialism and Colonialism are used interchangeably. It referred to phenomenon which appears when a state rules over distant areas inhabited by people ethnically and culturally alien and regards its own economic interests as paramount in regulating the economic life of such areas.¹³ Imperialism is the functioning and development of a national capitalism on a world scale.¹⁴ It rewards itself by unabashedly taking among the bullion and the produce of the colonies to the mother country. Major benefits accrue from the raw materials from the colonies and sale to them finished products made from those and other materials. Moreover, the economic development of the colonies is kept in check to keep them in a state of economic dependence on the ruling power.¹⁵ The economic aspect of the New Imperialism was export of regions of lower economic development and the production. The political aspect was the maintenance of some form or other of political control in those regions for the protection of investments.¹⁶ Colonialism signifies direct political control.¹⁷ Colonies constitute a large part "private markets" for the interests of the national group which control them.¹⁸ Colonial power, like any other, was 'an object of struggle and depended on the material, social and cultural resources of those involved'.¹⁹

The colonial state performed certain functions which the feudal states of absolutism performed in Western Europe such as the creation of centralized political power, uniform legal system, progressive consolidation of private property, introduction of communications system and abolition of internal barriers to trade.²⁰ In India, the colonial power became the ultimate legal authority; it commanded the monopoly of legitimate force and it enacted a minimum set of common values which it proceeded to enforce.²¹ Georges Balandier further elaborates "colonial situation": domination of an alien majority, asserting racial and cultural superiority over a materially inferior native majority; contact between a machine-oriented civilization with Christian origins, a powerful economy and a rapid rhythm of life and a non-Christian civilization that lacks machines and is

marked by a backward economy and a slow rhythm of life; and the imposition of first civilization upon the second.²²

By the 1830s, the Indian economy acquired the form of a characteristically colonial economy: the flow of colonial trade had been reversed from the export from India of textiles and luxuries to the export of primary agricultural products and import of industrial manufactures from Britain and the structures of colonial agrarian property, revenue, credit and commodity exchange were fully in place.²³ The colonial policy was to achieve the free flow of resources without any impediments. In the case of India, it was to form part of a system of international division of labour.²⁴ The basic feature of colonialism is the complete but complex integration and enmeshing of the colony with the world capitalist system in a subordinate or subservient position.²⁵ Colonialism was the midwife that assisted at the birth of European Capitalism.²⁶ It was one of the necessary preconditions of Capitalism and Imperialism was equally necessary element of Capitalism.²⁷ It not only integrated India into the world capitalist market but also unified its economy internally.²⁸ Moreover, the railway system in India helped in the consolidation of political power. The railways linked up the three Presidencies with a view to facilitating the movement of troops from one part of the country to another. By 1872, the trains were running between Lahore and Calcutta; Lahore and Bombay and Madras.²⁹

Imperialism became the highest form of Colonialism. Modern Colonialism did more than extract tribute, goods, and wealth from the countries that it conquered.³⁰ It denied history of the colonized. It deprived the subjected of their cultural rights and identity.³¹ Exploitation was characteristics of modern Imperialism. Imperial Britain did not defray the cost of her administration with services raised in India, but derived considerable profit in other forms. India was 'the brightest jewel in the British crown'. All classes of the British people shared in this profit, some more and others less.³²

I. Conclusion

The study of colonialism and imperialism as systems in India reveals that British rule was far more than a period of political domination—it was a comprehensive structure of control that penetrated every aspect of Indian life. Through economic exploitation, administrative reorganization, and cultural hegemony, colonialism institutionalized inequality and dependency, ensuring the long-term subservience of the colony to the imperial centre. Imperialism, functioning as the ideological counterpart of colonialism, justified this subjugation through narratives of civilization, progress, and benevolent governance, masking the extractive and oppressive realities of empire.

The British colonial system in India systematically reoriented the subcontinent's economy towards the needs of the empire, eroded indigenous institutions, and reshaped social hierarchies in ways that continue to influence postcolonial society. Yet, within these systems of domination, India also witnessed the rise of resistance, reform, and nationalist consciousness, which ultimately challenged and dismantled imperial authority.

By understanding colonialism and imperialism as interconnected systems rather than isolated events, we gain insight into the structural nature of domination and its enduring legacies. The effects of these systems persist in modern India—in patterns of economic disparity, administrative frameworks, and cultural attitudes. Recognizing these continuities is essential not only for historical understanding but also for addressing the postcolonial challenges that stem from this complex inheritance. The analysis of colonial and imperial systems thus remains vital to comprehending India's modern identity and its on-going pursuit of decolonization in thought, policy, and culture.

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