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## UNIT 25 SOCIAL POLICY AND INDIAN RESPONSE

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### 25.0 OBJECTIVES

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After reading this Unit you will learn :

- the factors which shaped the colonial social policy
- the early social policy of the British in India
- subsequent British intervention in Indian social practices, and
- the impact of British social policies, and the Indian response.

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### 25.1 INTRODUCTION

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The latter half of the 18th century saw the English East India Company emerge as a victorious commercial military power in Bengal after its victories at the Battles of Plassey and Buxar. The remaining decades of the 18th century and the early 19th century witnessed the slow and halting transformation of the British Company from trader-conquerors to rulers. This shift necessitated the establishment of institutional infrastructures and a definite policy perspective for governing the subject population. This process was marked by an initial dependence on pre-colonial institutions and mechanisms of rule, followed by *ad hoc* modifications in them, finally culminating in reordering of the institutions of government.

Economic and intellectual developments in Britain, combined with the requirements and limits of the newly established colonial government of India provide the context for the formulation of state policies in colonial India.

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### 25.2 HISTORIOGRAPHY OF COLONIAL POLICY FORMATION

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The study of colonial policy becomes important to understand the state's intervention in society. Early British administrators and subsequent Indian nationalist economists like R.C. Dutt, who commented on British policies in India, in spite of their opposing views shared certain common assumptions. Both viewed the colonial state as a monolithic entity which had the power to effect transformations in Indian society if it chose to. Following from this assumption it was logical to focus on the upper levels of the state machinery to understand the direction and nature of state policy.

Later, Marxist writers such as Rajni Palme Dutt in their study of British policy formulation focused on the requirements of the metropolitan economy. Another

noticeable stream in the historiography of this subject has focused on the multiple ideological influences on colonial policy makers as the dominant determinant of policy formulation. More recent studies at the regional and district levels have tried to counter the earlier preoccupation with the monolithic colonial state as the prime variable in the framing of policies. These works attribute great significance to local power configurations in determining the final outcome of state policies.

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### 25.3 EARLY SOCIAL POLICY OF THE BRITISH

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The term social policy covers wide range of policies pertaining to law, education, family, criminality, status ranking, social information gathering and various other similar kinds of state intervention for the collective life of the governed population with the object of regulating it. Given the extremely wide coverage of the term 'social policy' and the fact that some of these areas have already been covered in earlier Units, we shall concentrate in this Unit on British attitudes towards certain Indian attention and action in early colonial period. It may be mentioned at the outset that most of our discussions refer largely to Bengal. Being the headquarters of the Company's government in India and its early subjugation to British rule, Bengal provided a laboratory where the government developed many of its early state policies. Bengal was also the region where there existed a substantial number of educated middle class people who played a role in evolving a social policy. The economic activities of the British in Calcutta and the spread of western education among its upper classes contributed to the exhilaration of social and cultural life in the city. The Western educated Bengali elite, therefore, actively discussed and responded to British policies, apart from trying to shape its formulation.

Warren Hastings, the first Governor-General of India, was in favour of creating an English bureaucracy, which would be well versed in Indian languages and responsible to Indian traditions. In 1784 Hastings noted that "Every accumulation of knowledge and especially such as is obtained by social communication with people over whom we exercise dominion founded on the right of conquest, is useful to the stage : it is the gain of humanity ....." For Hastings the mastery over traditional Indian languages provided the key to understanding India and communicating with the subject population. With this end in mind he drafted a proposal for creating a professorship in Persian at Oxford. Civil servants were encouraged to learn Persian and Hindustani before coming to India. Since the Company took official action on the issue of language training only as late as 1790, Hastings as an immediate solution, gathered around himself a group of civil servants who were dedicated to the study and translation of Indian texts on law and jurisprudence. To encourage such activity, Hastings offered attractive financial inducement for translation exercises. Under his patronage Bengali became the first Sanskrit based vernacular to be studied systematically by Englishmen. Nathaniel Halched, a close aide of Hastings compiled and translated into English a set of Hindu customary and religious laws. In 1788 he published a **Grammar of the Bengali Language**.

Hasting's efforts at reproducing Company documents in Indian languages promoted the beginning of printing and publishing in Calcutta. Warren Hastings was also instrumental in founding the Asiatic Society which was to help in 'rediscovering' the early traditions of Indians. The establishment of the Calcutta Madrassa was another step in this direction.

The cultural and social policy during Hasting's governor generalship has often been explained as one inspired by the ideology of British Orientalism. It must be kept in mind that this ideology also fitted in with the requirements and limits of the British empire in India. Knowledge about the subject population, their social customs, manners and codes were essential prerequisites for developing. Permanent institutions of rule in India, Hasting's policy to rule the conquered in their own way and resist anglicization reflected a combination of Orientalist conceptions and elements of political pragmatism. Early British official reports on the conditions of the Malabar on the West Coast exhibit the above discussed tendency to view native social practices sympathetically even when they differed from Western norms. For instance late 18th century reports describe the Nair custom of matrilineal and polyandry without contempt. Company officials reported on polyandry amongst Nair

women, explaining it as a consequence of the marital profession of the Nayar males. Later in the nineteenth century matrilineal inheritance came to be viewed as 'unnatural' and Nayar female polyandry was condemned as 'concubinage' and 'immoral'.

**Check Your Progress 1**

- 1) What are the various trends in historical writings on colonial policy formulation? Write in 50 words.

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- 2) What was the cultural and social policy of the British during Warren Hastings Governor Generalship? Write in ten lines.

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## 25.4 CHANGES IN COLONIAL SOCIAL INTERVENTION

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Since the end of Hasting's tenure as governor-general the attitude and policies of the Indian Government slowly and hesitatingly but progressively moved in the direction of cautiously intervening in Indian social institutions. Orientalism which was the characteristic feature of Hastings period now came to be criticized by a variety of ideological streams which shared the belief that Indian society needed urgent modernization and westernization. The Evangelical challenge led by William Wilberforce and Charles Grant (who later became the President of the Company's Board of Control) asserted that Hinduism was based on superstition, idolatry and the tyranny of the priests. Their avowed objectives were to modernize Indians by Christian missionary proselytization. The 'Radicals' headed by Jeremy Bentham, James Mill and John Stuart Mill based their ideas on utilitarian notions of reason and science. They advocated happiness of the greatest number rather than liberty as the aim of good government. The protection of individual life and property were seen as the means to achieve this goal.

These contending ideologies provided the ideological determinants of policy formulations. Pragmatic considerations of not provoking widescale resentment and revolt acted as severe constraint in the wholesale application of Western ideals on India. We shall now turn to detailed study of some specific instances of governmental intervention in social practices.

### 25.4.1 Infanticide

The first traditional social custom which was suppressed by the British Indian government was the practice of infanticide. Female infanticide was prevalent in many

parts of India. The difficulty and expenses incurred in marrying girls amongst the Rajputs, the Jats, the Mewatis and the Rajput Rajkumars of Benares gave rise to the practice of killing female infants by starvation or poisoning. Jonathan Duncan, the Resident of Benares was the first official who tried to curb this social evil. Instead of unilaterally abolishing infanticide by legislation Duncan met the local Rajkumars and convinced them that the killing of female infants went against the tenets of Hindu scriptures. Duncan knew that in the prevailing social system female children were an economic liability to their families and he promised monetary compensation by the Government if the Rajkumars abandoned this practice.

Reverend Ward in his book *A View of the History, Literature and Religion of the Hindoos* provides a detailed description of the practice of infanticide in Bengal.

William Carey, a missionary in the College of Fort William vehemently argued for abolishing these customs. A member of the Governor General's Council who was sympathetic to the Serampore Missionaries pointed out these social evils to Wellesley. Carey after consulting Hindu **pundits** submitted a petition to the government for immediately suppressing these practices. Around the same time the Calcutta magistrates sent a letter to the Vice-President-in-Council stating that infanticide had never enjoyed sanction under the Mughal or the British governments. They also mentioned that no public opposition was encountered when the police prevented infanticide.

Ultimately a law banning infanticide was enacted as Regulation VI of 1802.

The abolition of infanticide which appears to have been effective in Bengal did not result in any significant opposition by the public. Probably its limited practice in Bengal and the absence of religious sanction allowed the British to stamp it out easily. The banning of infanticide in other parts of India does not appear to have been effective, as this practice continued even after its prohibition.

In the case of suppression of infanticide the initiative for change came for local level officials and missionaries. The Governor General gave his assent only after ascertaining the views of the Hindu **pundits** and the unlikely possibility of such a measure causing public hostility.

#### 25.4.2 Sati

The next significant state intervention in Indian social life was the suppression of widow burning or **sati**. This practice was widespread in all the three Presidencies at the beginning of the 19th century with the larger number of reported incidents being in the lower districts of Bengal.

#### OFFICIALLY REPORTED INCIDENTS OF SATI IN THE LOWER PROVINCES 1815-1823

Division	No. of incidents
Calcutta	3379
Dacca	408
Murshidabad	198
Patna	425
Benares	875
Bareilly	140
Total	5425

Widow burning was practised not only by the Brahmans but also other castes. However, in proportion to the total population the incidence of **Sati** was very limited. For example during the 1825 cholera epidemic when more than 25,000 people died, the total number of widow burnings amounted to only 63 in Bakarganj district of Bengal.

As early as 1795 Colebrook tried to demonstrate that this practice constituted a departure from the authentic Vedic tradition. Though **Sati** had been a vogue from very ancient times in India, a number of Indian rulers including Akbar, Jahangir, Guru Amardas, the Maratha chief Ahalyabai, the Peshwas, the King of Tanjore and the Portuguese in Goa tried to discourage this practice.

No sustained and systematic effort was made to suppress this inhuman practice till the 19th century. While the other European companies in Bengal had banned widow burning in their territories, the Calcutta Supreme Court disallowed it only in one part of the city.

The government's early attitude towards this practice can be seen when in 1789, Brooke, the collector of Shahabad disallowed an act of **Sati**. Referring the case of Governor-General Cornwallis, he noted "The rites and superstitions of the Hindu religion should be allowed with the most unqualified tolerance, but a practice at which human nature shudders cannot permit without particular instruction" Cornwallis replied asking him not to employ coercive methods and try and persuade the people to stop this practice. In 1797 the Midnapore District Magistrate who stopped the burning of a child widow was asked by the Governor General to avoid coercion and use persuasion.

Led by William Carey, the Serampore Missionaries conducted a survey on widow burning in the vicinity of Calcutta. Carey got the **pundits** employed by the college of Fort William to collect Hindu **shastras** containing information on **Sati**. After studying these he concluded that whereas Hinduism did not forbid it, it did not make it obligatory either. Carey then sent a memorial to Wellesley for curbing **Sati**. In 1805 Wellesley asked the Judges of the **Nizamat Adalat** to find out to what extent the practice of **Sati** was based on Hindu religion. The **Pundits** of the court declared that forcible burning of widows was not permitted. The court also noted that **Sati** being widely practised and popular among Hindus, any measure to abolish it would result in considerable dissatisfaction amongst them.

In 1813 after some vacillation the government fixed the minimum age for a widow to become **Sati** at sixteen years and declared that a mother of a child less than three years could not become **Sati** unless another person undertook to look after the child.

In 1819 and 1821 two Judges of the Supreme Court pleaded for an immediate suppression of **Sati** arguing that such a measure would not result in any serious public resentment. This plea was rejected by the government. In 1821 Lord Hastings refused to authorize the total abolition of **Sati** fearing it would incite religious fanaticisms. Hasting's successor Lord Amherst was against the prohibition of **Sati** because he feared that such a measure would have immediate adverse repercussions on the sepoys of the army. The Bombay government and Charles Metcalfe in Delhi were also not in favour of immediately suppressing this custom.

While the government dithered over this issue the Westernized Bengali intelligentsia led by Rammohan Roy actively agitated for the abolition of **Sati**. In 1818 he sent a petition to the government urging them to abolish this practice and counter orthodox Hindu demands against prohibition. A vigilance committee was organized to strictly implement the age restrictions on the practice of **Sati**. Rammohan engaged in a polemical debate with the supporters of **Sati** such as Kasinath Tarkavagish (1819), wrote pamphlets and newspaper articles to mobilize public opinion against this customs. He used his journal **Sambad Kaumudi** to further his campaign, with papers like **Samachar Darpan** and **Bangadut** supporting him. The **Samachar Chandrika** became the organ of his orthodox Hindu opponents.

Meanwhile the Christian missionaries attracted English public attention to the evils of **Sati** and the urgent need for its prohibition by the government, in Britain. The Parliament instructed the Indian government to publish all the available information on **Sati**.

In spite of the mounting demand for its abolition in India and Britain the parliament, and the company authorities in England did not want to take any decision themselves, not knowing what reaction it would produce in India. Finally it was left to Bentinck, the Governor-General to legislate against Widow burning in December 1829.

The abolition of widow-burning by the government did not result in any visible disaffection or resentment among the Indians. As in the case of infanticide, the initiative for banning widow burning came mainly from the Western educated Indian intelligentsia, Christian missionaries and individual administrators. The marked procrastination by the Company's government in abolishing it was mainly due to its extreme fear of inciting a violent Indian reaction.

### 25.4.3 Slavery

Slavery was another institution which came under attack in British India. Slavery as a system of labour exploitation was prevalent in India till its abolition in 1843. The extent and economic significance of the slave labour in general economic terms, however, varied greatly from region to region. In Bombay and Calcutta slaves constituted an article of trade; Arab traders brought slaves from Arabia and Africa for sale. In order to survive famines, such as the one in 1803, a large number of poor offered themselves in the slave market.

In Madras, unlike the other two presidencies, predial slavery was very important. This form of slavery was very significant in the region's agricultural production. Malabar, Coorg and Canara were the chief areas where widespread predial slavery existed.

Procrastination was once again the most evident feature in the Government of India attitude towards the abolition of slavery. As early as 1774 the Government was concerned about this practice. Evangelical propaganda against slavery led by Wilberforce helped in focusing public attention in Britain on the evils of slavery in India. Though Britain abolished slave trade in her dominions in 1820, the Company in India acknowledged the legality of slavery on the grounds that it was a traditional practice with religious sanction.

The Charter Act of 1832 directed the Indian Government to ameliorate the condition of slaves "as soon as extinction shall be practicable and safe, and should prepare drafts of laws and regulations for the purposes aforesaid."

This led to the appointment of the Indian Law Commission of 1835. Though its primary task was to frame a Penal code, the law commission drew up an anti-slavery Report in 1841. The Law Commission requested the government that some of its members be permitted to conduct local level enquiries into the practice. The government refused this request.

In 1839 the Law Commission submitted a Draft Act whereby inflicting corporal punishment on slaves was made a penal offence. Before taking any action on the Draft Act the Commissioners discussed the possibility of such a measure exciting public disaffection. Regulation X of 1811 (prohibition of import of slaves by land), Regulation IV of 1832 (prohibition of inter provincial movement of slaves) and the practical abolition of slavery in Delhi were reviewed and seen to have had no hostile repercussions. Several members of the commission were against immediate passing of the Act and letters were sent to ascertain the views of the Bombay and Madras governments on the issue. The Bombay government did not feel the need for any special law and the Madras administration also doubted the expediency of such an Act.

Under pressure of parliamentary opinions, the law commission was again asked to frame a new Act which after considerable delay on the part of the Indian Government was passed as Act V of 1845, abolishing slavery in India.

The impact of the Act suppressing slavery was however very limited. The most crucial provision in the Act merely stated that no claim to the labour of a slave was to be recognized in a British court of law and that a government official could no longer force a slave to return to his master.

The more important factor in the decline of slavery was the generation of sources of alternate employment in the later 19th century in plantation and public works.

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## 25.5 THE BRITISH POLICY AND THE INDIAN RESPONSE : AN ASSESSMENT

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The above discussion suggests significant shifts in British attitude towards Indian traditions and culture. The changing servitor role of the Indian colony and the pragmatic political considerations of the Indian government produced the context which defined the direction of state policies in India.

**Impact of British Rule  
Polity and Society**

The conscious attempts at state intervention in India's social practices and customs were extremely limited in their impact. However, the colonial government by altering the political configuration of precolonial India did trigger off significant structural social changes. The British consciously denied political power and privileges to the precolonial ruling Indian groups while recognising their social and caste status.

Education was also an important instrument of social changes, perhaps more effective than legislation. (See Unit 21).

The small Western educated Bengali intelligentsia engaged in debates with the state on policy matters, responded to policy changes and independently tried to bring about social changes in Bengal. This groups of intelligentsia which included personalities like Rammohan Roy and Keshub Chandra Sen were impressed by Britain's progress and convinced that Indian society needed urgent social change. At the same time the resisted anglicization as well as Christian missionary attempts to convert Indians.

Intellectuals like Rammohan Roy offered to their countrymen a reformed Indian religion, **vedantism**, free of superstition and priesthood. The Brahmo Samaj, which was their organizational form coupled Hindu reformation with an adoption of progressive Western values. Unfortunately the Brahmos and the Bengal reformist groups could not extend their campaign beyond the restricted Western educated urban Bengali population. The message of social reform, however, spread gradually to many parts of India and brought about reform movement under Indian initiative, independent of governmental support. (See Units 26 and 27).

It may therefore be reiterated that the pragmatic considerations of the British Indian government acted as a strong check to the translation of reformist ideas into state policies in India. Social and religious institutions were an area in which the government intervened with great caution. Even the policy of limited state intervention in social affairs, surveyed above, suffered a total reversal in the period after the 1857 revolt. From then onwards social reform was left mainly to indigenous initiative.

**Check Your Progress 2**

- 1) What were the reasons for the changes that took place in the colonial social policy in the period after Warren Hastings?

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- 2) Write on the development and the impact of British policies with reference to Sati, Infanticide, and slavery.

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## 25.6 LET US SUM UP

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After reading this Unit we hope that you have grasped the various ideological and material factors which provided the direction for British social policy in India. The Government of India cautiously intervened in Indian social practices under pressure from individual administrators, missionaries and Indian social reformers. However, the impact of these policies (except in the field of education) was extremely limited and did not provoke any significant Indian response. In the post 1857 period even these limited efforts at social changes were consciously abandoned by the colonial government.

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## 25.7 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES

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### Check Your Progress 1

- 1) See Section 25.2
- 2) See Section 25.3

### Check Your Progress 2

- 1) You should gather your information from Section 25.3 and 25.4 and then compare the two.
- 2) See Section 25.4

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## SOME USEFUL BOOKS FOR THIS BLOCK

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Datta K.K.(ed.), *A Comprehensive History of India Volume XI*,

Chandra, Bipan, *Modern India*.

Kopf, David, *British Orientalism and the Bengal Renaissance*

Stokes, Eric, *English Utilitarians and India*