Lecture 4
Bengal under British Rule – Social and Political Developments

Introduction

1. Indian society underwent many changes after the British came to India. In the 18th and 19th century, certain social practices like female infanticide, child marriage, sati, polygamy and a rigid caste system became more prevalent. These practices were against human dignity and values. Education was limited to a handful of men belonging to the upper castes.

2. The Britishers brought some new ideas such as liberty, equality, freedom and human rights. These ideas appealed to some sections of our society and led to some social and political reforms/developments.

Social Reforms

5. At the forefront of the social reform movements were visionary Indians such as Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Sir Syed Ahmed Khan, Iswar Chandra Bidyasagar, Begum Rokeya and Pandita Ramabai. These movements looked for social unity and strived towards liberty, equality and fraternity. The social reform movements tried to achieve two major objectives:

a. Emancipation of women and extension of equal rights to them.

b. Removal of caste rigidities and in particular the abolition of untouchability.



6. **Social Laws Concerning Women**. The condition of women in Bengal in one word was miserable due to a number of evil practices. The doors of education had almost been shut for them. A Hindu woman was not entitled to inherit any property. In the 19th and 20th centuries some laws were enacted with the sincere efforts of social reformers, humanists and some British administrators to improve the condition of women in Indian society.

a. **Abolition of Sati**. Efforts of Raja Ram Mohan Roy led to the abolition of Sati in 1829.

b. **Widow Remarriage**. Due to the campaigns of Raja Ram Mohan Roy and Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar widow remarriage Act was passed in July 1856.

c. **Child Marriage**. The minimum marriageable age for a girl was raised to 14 years in 1929 through Sharda Act which was 10 years in 1846 and 12 years in 1891.

d. **Inter-Communal Marriages**. A law passed in 1872, sanctioned inter-caste and inter-communal marriages.

7. **Education**. The British took keen interest in introducing the English language in India. The spread of English language and western education helped Indians to adopt modern, rational, democratic, liberal and patriotic outlook. Important institutions like Calcutta Madrasa (1781), the Asiatic Society of Bengal (1784), the Sanskrit College at Banaras (1794) and the Fort William College (1800) became the epicentres of acquiring knowledge.

7. **Hindu Religious Reform Movements**.

a. **Brahmo Samaj by Raja Ram Mohan Roy**. Founded in 1828, this movement fought against idol worship, polytheism, caste oppression, unnecessary rituals and other social evils. It also fought against prevailing superstitions among Hindus.

b. **Ramkrishna Movement by Swami Vivekananda (Narendranath Dutta)**. Ramakrishna Paramahangsha (1834-86) was a saintly person who sought religious salvation in the traditional ways of renunciation, meditation and

devotion. Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902) was his disciple. He popularised Ramakrishna's religious messages.

c. **Movements to uplift Backward Caste**. The caste system was primarily based on the fourfold division of Hindu society viz. Brahmins, Kshatriya, Vaishyas and Shudras. The Shudras were subjected to all kinds of social discrimination. Abolition of untouchability became a major issue of the 19th century social and religious reform movements in the country. Mahatma Gandhi made the removal of untouchability a part of his constructive programme.

8. **Reforms Amongst Muslims**.

a. **Sayyid Ahmad Khan (1817-98)**. He founded, in 1875, at Aligarh the Muhammedan Anglo-Oriental College as a centre for spreading western sciences and culture. Later, this College grew into the Aligarh Muslim University.

b. **Muhammad Iqbal (1876-1938)**. Muhammad Iqbal was one of the greatest poets of modem India. He profoundly influenced the philosophical and religious outlook of the younger generation of Muslims as well as of Hindus.

c. **Nawab Abdul Latif (1828 – 1893)**. Latif transformed the Hindu College into Presidency College and thus open it for non-Hindus as well. He also established numerous educational institutes, including Haji Muhammad Mohsin Govt. High School, Rajshahi. He established the Mohammedan Literary Society of Calcutta.

d. **Syed Ameer Ali (1849-1948)**. Syed Ameer Ali was an Indian educator, judge, lawyer, philosopher, and writer who was famous for his books on Muslim history and the modern development of Islam.

Political Developments

10. **Formation of Indian National Congress (1885)**. Inspired by a suggestion made by Allan Octavian Hume, a retired British civil servant, 73 Indian delegates met in Bombay in 1885 and founded the Indian National Congress (INC). The early

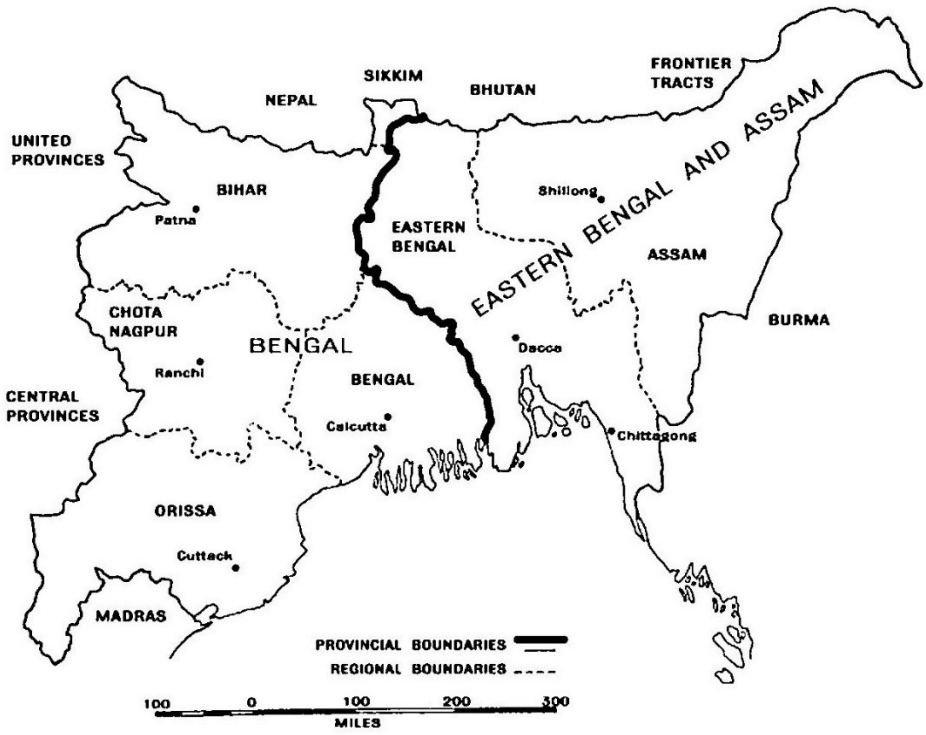
objectives of the organization were to develop and consolidate sentiments of national unity remaining loyal to Britain.

Initial leadership included, among others, Dadabhai Naoroji, Pherozeshah Mehta, Badruddin Tyabji, W.C. Bonnerji, Surendranath Banerji, Romesh Chandra Dutt, S. Subramania Iyer.

11. **Partition of Bengal**. Bengal was a large province with a huge population of 78 million. Owing to the vastness of the area and huge population, the Britishers felt the necessity of dividing the province into two. Basing on that the partition of Bengal came into force on 16th October 1905 when Lord Curzon was the Viceroy. The province of Bengal consisted of parts of Bengal along with parts of Orissa and Bihar with a population of 54 million of which 42 million were Hindus and 18 million were Muslims. The new province of Eastern Bengal and Assam had a population of 31 million among which 18 million were Muslims and 12 million were Hindus.

Although the extended area and huge population were shown as reasons for the partition, the real objective behind such division was political. As the Indian independence movement was gaining momentum, the British wanted to weaken Bengal which was considered the nerve centre of Indian nationalism. The ill-strategized partition outraged the masses, especially the Bengalis and led to many protests, strikes, boycotts, mass movements etc., on the streets. The Indian National Congress was highly against the partition and condemned it by the various programmes.

The British Government surrendered to the agitation and protests. The partition of Bengal was abrogated on 12th December 1911 by Lord Hardinge. However, revocation of partition of Bengal created anti-British and anti-Hindu sentiments among Muslims as they lost their majority in East Bengal.



Partition of Bengal in 1905

11. **Formation of Muslim League**. Although Congress was successful in many areas, it was unsuccessful in gaining the trust of Indian Muslims. During the annual meeting of the All India Muslim Education Conference in Ahsan Manzil in 1906, the Nawab of Dhaka, Khwaja Salimullah, proposed the formation of a political party to protect the interests of Muslims and thereby Muslim League came into existence. Muslim League's strong advocacy in 1930s for the establishment of a separate Muslim-majority nation-state resulted in partitioning India in 1947.

12. **Lucknow Pact 1916**. The Lucknow Pact was signed between the Indian National Congress and the All India Muslim League in December 1916 in Lucknow. Main features of the pact included that there should be self-rule for India and Muslims should be given one-third representation in the central government.