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Sociocultural *Malaise* of India under the English East India Company Rule

Belkacem Belmekki

For centuries long, the inhabitants of the Indian Subcontinent, being overwhelmingly of Hindu faith, have been known for their attachment to their customs and traditions which are unmatched anywhere worldwide. Probably the most significant character that distinguishes the Indian society from other societies throughout the world is its unique social composition: the caste system. Yet, the latter had been subject to a *malaise* during early British rule, namely, under the rule of the English East India Company until the mid-nineteenth century. In the following paragraphs, I will attempt to shed some light on the historical circumstances in which the East India Company got involved in the sociocultural tissue of the local population in India as well as the natives' reaction. But, before dealing with that, it is useful to give, briefly, an outline of this main social structure, namely, the caste system.

According to the Shastra, a sacred scripture of Hinduism, the Hindu society is divided into four castes, or social classes: Brahmans (priests and scholars), Kshatriyas (warriors and rulers), Vaishyas (farmers and tradesmen) and Shudras (serfs and menials) (Galbraith and Mehta 1980: 51). People outside these groups were known as "untouchables" and were regarded as the dregs of society (David 2002: 20). Each caste was considered inferior to those above it and superior to those below it. Also, members of different castes did not mix socially. In other words, in all social matters such as marriage, career, and even the type of food to be eaten, each group formed an exclusive unit.[1]

According to the Indian sociologist A. R. Desai (1959: 224), the status of a man born in a particular caste was usually determined by the position that his caste occupied in this social stratification. Once born in that caste, his status was predetermined and could not change. In fact, birth was an essential element that decided the status of a man within his community in India, and this could by no means be changed, regardless of any talent or wealth that an individual could acquire. This leads to the conclusion that it was the caste which determined what vocation a person should pursue.

Besides that, each caste had its own conception of the norm of conduct by which its members had to abide. Any failure to observe these ethics was interpreted as a sin and so the offending member was subjected to punishment such as excommunication, fines and even flogging. For instance, to marry or even to accept food from a person from a lower caste was regarded as a serious sin (Desai 1959: 226). A. R. Desai stated that the caste system was "sanctified by the sanction of religion. Its very genesis was attributed to God Brahman. If a member of

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1   Desai (1959: 224). Galbraith and Mehta stated that intercaste marriage was strictly forbidden by caste rules, and if something of this type occurred, the "culprits" would be considered as "outcastes" (1980: 52).

a caste infringed the caste rules, he did not merely commit a crime against the caste but perpetrated a sin against religion. Thus, religion fortified the hold of the caste over its members" (1959: 226).

The Indian population had lived under such social organisation for generations and, though unfair as it seems, no one dared challenge its strict laws. Yet, this was going to change upon the arrival of the British. In fact, ever since the English East India Company established itself in India by the end of the eighteenth century, there had been continuous clamour from Christian missionaries in Britain, who regarded Indian religious and social traditions as very backward, to reform the local "primitive" lifestyle. Many of them believed that the conversion of Indian Hindus and Muslims to Christianity was their duty (James 1997: 224 f.). C. Hibbert quoted Herbert Edwardes, Commissioner of Peshawar (a central Northwest Frontier province, Pakistan), saying that he believed that India had been given to England rather than to Portugal or France because England had made "the greatest effort to preserve the Christian religion in its purist apostolic form" (1978: 52). Yet, the East India Company did not allow these missionaries to enter India, and instead, it adopted a policy of nonintervention, being conscious of how sensitive Indians were of their religious and sociocultural matters (Prasad 1981: 442).

Be that as it may, a change in the Company's attitude towards Christian missionaries occurred in 1813. In fact, the Evangelical movement in Britain, which became so powerful at the beginning of the nineteenth century, succeeded in persuading the British Government to force the Company to allow them into the Subcontinent (Wild 2000: 162). Thus, the Charter Act of 1913 called for the establishment of the Church of England in India, and gave the evangelicals unrestricted access to the country (Read and Fisher 1998: 35).

Once they set foot in India, the missionaries went openly proselytizing among the local population. Copies of the New Testament were distributed to learners of Hindi script on completion of their course in mission schools. In some areas, the Christian gospel was preached to prisoners in local jails (Hibbert 1978: 52). Moreover, the missionaries' enthusiasm for Christianizing Indians led them so far as to put pressure on the company to withdraw its patronage of certain Hindu temples and festivals (Spear 1990: 130). Besides that, in an attempt to enhance their achievements, the missionaries undertook to educate the younger Indian generation. According to B. Prasad, this "orientation of young minds was inevitably to lead to subversion of the indigenous faiths" (1981: 517).

This religious interference provoked the fear of the Indian population. The latter, mainly the orthodox, interpreted all Company's actions as an attempt to forcibly convert them to Christianity. For instance, it was customary in prisons to allow each prisoner to prepare his own food in accordance with his caste. Yet, this was discontinued in favour of collective cooking, ostensibly for the purpose of more convenient administration. Since Hindus of higher caste could not, for religious reasons, eat food prepared by cooks who did not belong to their own group, this regulation was regarded as a violation to their caste system; thus, they grew alienated (Hibbert 1978: 52). Similarly, Muslim prisoners were required to shave off their beards for the purpose of cleanliness. Since the beard was a symbol of their faith, their religious susceptibilities were aroused at such a measure (53). Even in hospitals problems of this kind emerged. Sick men and women, belonging to different castes, were all required to share the same wards (53).

Moreover, the introduction of the modern means of transport during the first half of the nineteenth century, such as the railways, made mass travelling possible in India for the first time. This resulted in reluctant contact between Indians coming from different social classes (Desai 1959: 228). This was, similarly, interpreted by Hindus as an attempt to destroy their caste system, which was the backbone of their Hindu faith.

In addition to proselytising, the missionaries went a step further by deploring Indian traditional practices and religious rituals and describing them as too cruel and primitive. Charles Grant, a contemporary missionary in India, stated that the Hindus exhibited "human nature in a very degraded, humiliating state," and that their religion was marked by "idolatry with its rabble of impure deities, its monsters of wood and stone, its false principles and corrupt practices, delusive hopes and fears, its ridiculous ceremonies and degrading superstitions, its lying legends and fraudulent impositions" (B. Prasad 1981: 431). As a result, they put pressure on the administration of the East India Company to put an end to traditional practices of the local population in the Subcontinent.

The Governor-General of India, under whom the process of reforming, or rather, Westernizing the Indian society happened, was Lord Bentinck[2] whom P. Spear described as a "convinced westerner and humanist, with little sympathy for Indian culture and institutions" (1990: 124). According to Read

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2 Lord William Bentinck was Governor-General of India between 1828 and 1835.

and Fisher (1998: 35), shortly before setting sail to India, Lord Bentinck, the liberal humanist with a strong evangelical tendency, was told by Lord Ellenborough, then president of the Board of Control of the East India Company in London: "We have a great moral duty to perform in India."

Thus, upon entering the Indian scene, Lord Bentinck began performing his "moral duty" by outlawing *sati*. The latter, meaning devotion, was a practice in which a Hindu widow showed her devotion to her dead husband by voluntarily burning herself on his funeral pyre. However, many widows sacrificed themselves unwillingly (Read and Fisher 1998: 35). In fact, most Hindu widows committed *sati* out of desperation and fear of their families. This was due to the fact that in accordance with the Hindu tradition, widows were not allowed to remarry, and so became a burden to their families (ibid.). Besides that, as Prasad (1981: 434) stated in this respect, some greedy relatives usually wanted to get rid of the widow by "appealing at a most distressing hour to her devotion to and love for her husband," in order to appropriate her inheritance.

Lord Bentinck, who regarded *sati* as a serious crime against humanity, passed Regulation XVII in December 1862, whereby he declared the practice of *sati,* or burning alive widows of Hindus, anywhere in the Indian Subcontinent as illegal and punishable by criminal courts.[3] Yet, following the outlawing of this practice, the state of young widows was that of misery since they were not allowed to remarry. Furthermore, some of them resorted to prostitution and debauchery (Prasad 1981: 439 f.). Being faced with such an unwelcome outcome, the Government of India was compelled in 1856 to pass the Widow's Remarriage Act, which made remarriage of Hindu widows legal. This measure, though regarded by many Indian reformers as a positive action, aroused much disaffection among Hindus, mainly orthodox, who regarded it as a breach of their faith and customs.

Next, Lord Bentinck turned his attention to *thugi*. The latter was practised by "thugs," who were worshippers of Kali, the Hindu goddess of destruction. They carried out their ritual killings by befriending travellers and then strangling them with a piece of sacred scarf. What happened next was stripping them of their belongings (David 2002: 7). Read and Fisher (1998: 36) described the *thugi* practice as follows:

The thugs would befriend groups of travellers, suggesting they join forces for safety on the road. For some days they would journey and camp together, until one night when sitting round the fire, joking and talking happily, the thug leader would clap his hands and shout "Bring the tobacco!" At this signal, the thugs would leap into action, strangling their victims with special handkerchiefs, with a coin dedicated to the goddess bound into one corner to give extra grip for the left hand. It would all be over in minutes. The bodies would be stripped and bundled into graves … and the thugs would be on their way, taking their victims' possessions as their earthly reward from Kali.

Thugi had existed in India for centuries, but during the first half of the nineteenth century, namely, when the Indian economy collapsed due to the Company exploitative tendencies, this practice increased significantly. As a matter of fact, Read and Fisher (1998: 36) stated that there were about 10,000 thugs in 40 or 50 great gangs, claiming between 20,000 and 30,000 victims a year. Yet, the same authors cast doubt on the exactitude of these figures and claim that no one can be sure due to the fact that this practice was surrounded by total secrecy. Moreover, there were no survivors to tell the tale (36).

The British first learned about such a practice only when their *sepoys*, or native regiments, going home on leave or returning to the barracks, began disappearing en route (Read and Fisher 1998: 36). Actually, as Prasad put it, the disappearance of hundreds of natives could hardly be noted, or it created no astonishment or alarm, since a journey in the Indian Subcontinent was a matter of months (1981: 456).

Thus, the East India Company officials were determined to banish such a cruel custom. Their reaction, actually, was prompted more by self-defence than by humanity due to the fact that thugs were wreaking havoc on the Company's inland trade. In other words, *thugi* made travel within India very dangerous and insecure. In this respect, Prasad wrote that "only when in Bengal and elsewhere the interests of British commerce called for safer travel did the government wake up to the necessity of eradicating the evil" (1981: 456).

Consequently, as part of his campaign to reform the Indian society, Lord Bentinck set up the Thugi and Dakaiti[4] Department in 1829 under Captain William Sleeman's direction. Captain Sleeman, aided by 12 assistants, recruited hundreds of informers whose intelligence enabled his police to intercept parties of thugs and excavate their burial grounds (David 2002: 7). According to Read and Fisher (1998: 36 f.), in a six-year period Sleeman's police got 3,000 thugs "convicted in the courts and sentenced either to hanging or transportation to a pe-

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3 Prasad (1981: 439). According to Spear, between 500 and 850 *satis* took place annually in Bengal alone (1990: 125).

4 Dakaiti means an armed robbery by gangs.

nal colony for life."[5] In 1843 and 1851, legislation was adopted to deprive the culprits of many formalities of law in the course of their prosecution (Prasad 1981: 457). By 1852, groups of thugs had been disbanded and their families settled under police vigilance (457).

Yet, the cruellest social practice which had been dealt with even before the advent of Lord Bentinck was that of "infanticide." The latter meant the murder of the child by his parents and prevailed in some communities in India. The act was performed secretly by strangulating or starving the child to death, or in some cases, applying poison to the nipples of the suckling mother (Chopra 1973: 639). This sacrifice had two facets. One was the offer of a child in sacrifice to placate the river Ganga, which is a Hindu deity, and which was common in the Bengal areas that were close to this sacred river (Prasad 1981: 441). It was mainly carried out to fulfil a vow by a childless woman that in case she was blessed by the sacred river Ganga with children she would sacrifice her firstborn child to it (441). Logically the child, whether male or female, was allowed to grow till such time that other children were born to the woman. Prasad (441) quoted a contemporary describing this practice:

If after the vow they [women] have children, the eldest is nourished till a proper age, which may be three, four or nine years according to the circumstances, when on a particular day, appointed for bathing in a particular part of the river, they take the child with them and offer it to the Goddess. The child is encouraged to go further and further into the water till it is carried away by the stream, or is pushed off by inhuman parents.

The other type of infanticide, known as "female infanticide," was the killing of a female infant soon after its birth. According to Prasad (1981: 441), this practice, which was mainly practised by high castes in central, northern, and western India, had no religious observance and was prompted by "pride, poverty, and avarice." In other words, the presence of an unmarried girl in the family was regarded as a disgrace to it. Moreover, even if marriage were arranged, it would lead to financial burden as it was customary for the Indian bride to offer the dowry to the groom. Also others, mainly low-caste Hindus, resorted to female infanticide because of the difficulty of finding a suitable husband caused by the custom of hypergamy, namely marrying a person of a superior caste (Chopra 1973: 639).

The British were disgusted by such a practice even before India was opened to the Christian missionaries. It was during Lord Wellesley's governor-generalship (1789–1805) that the Company took legal measures to put an end to it by passing Regulation XXI of 1795 and Regulation III of 1804 which declared such infanticides as murder (Prasad 1981: 443).

The ending of these cruel traditional practices was in itself a progressive step aiming at freeing Indians of their harmful superstitions. Yet, it aroused much discontent among the local population, notably the orthodox Hindus and Muslims, who interpreted this interference in their religious and sociocultural life as part of a scheme devised by the East India Company officials to forcibly convert them to Christianity. This led Indians to impugn all innovations brought by the British to the Indian Subcontinent. Probably the best example illustrating such a situation was the Indian reaction to the introduction of modern means of communication, like the telegraph, which were interpreted by Indians as an attempt of "white wizards" to work some kind of magic upon them. In this respect, Desai (1959: 286) stated that "even progressive measures such as the construction of railways and the establishment of the telegraph system were interpreted as acts of black magic by which the white wizards schemed to tie India in iron chains."

In a word, the reforms that were thrust upon the native Indians by the East India Company administration had never been welcome in the Subcontinent. In fact, by interfering, or rather tampering, with the sociocultural tissue of the local inhabitants, partly under the pretext of the "civilizing mission," and partly out of expediency, the British officials only aroused the sensitivities of the population and led to a widespread *malaise* which, as many contemporaries believed, was instrumental in sparking off the bloody happenings of 1857.

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5 The same authors added that one of these thugs admitted having personally killed 719 people, and only regretted that he had not killed more (37).

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Title Cups and People

Relationships and Change in Grassfields Art

Mathias Alubafi Fubah

Introduction

Throne objects such as title cups, for example, have been produced and used in Bambui since immemorial time. Reserved mostly for titleholders or members of the traditional elites, title cups form part of a "network of exchange of objects that has played a crucial role in defining regional cultural identity at least since the eighteenth century" (Forni 2007: 42). Of all the regalia of traditional elites across the Cameroon Grassfields and Bambui in particular, the title cup is one of the most important objects used in understanding the traditional structure of the society and how the society in turn relates to the cup. It importance rests in it role in facilitating communication between the titleholder or successor, who is custodian of his people (the living), and their ancestors, considered the overall custodians of both the successor and his people. In other words, titleholders, both men and women automatically gain all the rights of their late forefathers and mothers upon receiving the title cup. A titleholder or successor without a title cup is unthinkable in Bambui.

Title cups in Bambui, as title cups in other villages across the Cameroon Grassfields (Knöpfli 1997:

17; Notué and Triaca 2005: 164 f.), are considered the "hands" that pilot the plane or activities of the village (Mombo-o II, pers. comm., March 2006). The title cup is one of the main objects used in traditional religious rituals such as initiation, ancestral worship, traditional marriages, child birth, and burials, all aim at enhancing the wellbeing of the Bambui community. As noted by Forni (2007: 42) and other Grassfields scholars, objects are essential elements in the comprehension of the commercial and competitive relationships among autonomous Grassfields villages. Title cups are entrusted into the hands of traditional elites such as the *fon*, who is head of the social organization of the village. The *fohnbe-eh* or Bambui *fon*, for example, is the secular and spiritual leader of the Bambui people as well as *ta-an-to-oh* or head of the royal clan (see Ndenge 2005: 33, for example, for more on Grassfields *fon*s). He oversees the organization and performance of all religious rituals in his community, presides over issues relating to war, and he is the highest magistrate in his *fondom*. He heads and is responsible for the creation and functioning of all traditional societies and *juju* groups that cater for the well-being of his people. All these are achieved through the use of a title cup in pouring libation on the ancestral stone of the ancestors or gods of the village. The *fohnbe-eh* is closely assisted in his functions by the *meufo* or queen mother, who is either his real mother or one of his sisters if his mother is deceased. The *meufo* is responsible for the well-being of the *fon*'s wives, princes. and princesses, as well as that of the entire Bambui community. She plays the role of magistrate and teacher over the *fon*'s wives, resolving disputes and educating them on how to perform their royal duties. The *meufo* is considered a titleholder in the Bambui *fondom* and she has the right to certain traditional religious rituals normally reserved for the *fon*. Like other titleholders, she owns a title cup that distinguishes her from other women in the palace and the villages as a whole.

The Bambui People and Their Culture

Bambui is one of the many Grassfields villages claiming to have come from the upper Mbam River, the region of the sacred lake usually referred to as Kimi or Rifum, home to the present-day Tikar. They were led to their present territory by a brave warlord leader called Zehtingong who subsequently became the first *fohnbe-eh*, fon of Bambui (date not known). It is believed the Bambui people settled temporarily at Pheduh, Mankha-ah Bghiendang and Tuola-a