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‘DS View’, an academic activity in which students, researchers and faculty are encouraged to write short academic essays on the Development discourse, aims to generate discussion on issues concurrent to the times we are living in. The topical range may include academic debates on issues such as poverty, inequality, gender, conflict and human security. The essay for DS View can be expository, argumentative, persuasive or analytical.

The topic of fifth DS View is **‘Gender and the British Raj’** written by Ramsha Masood Ahmad.

Dr. Zulfiqar Ali
Head,
Department of Development Studies

Gender and the British Raj

Ramsha Masood Ahmad

In sociological parlance the term gender refers to the way societies distinguish men and women and assign them stratified social roles (Diamond, 2002). These roles then determine the behaviours and delineate the nature of relationship between them. The institutions of social control such as families, governments, communities and educational institutions further entrench these behavioural patterns in the psyche of the male and female protagonists. In the Indo-Pak subcontinent this stereotypical profiling culminates in characteristics being distinctly ascribed in such a manner that the image of women emerges to be that of a vulnerable, inferior, indecisive, sentimental and subservient being, whereas, men are projected as tough, independent, overriding, decisive and rational beings (Goswami, 2013).

The attempt in this expository essay is to reflect on the interface between gender and the policies and practices orchestrated by the British colonial rulers in the Indian subcontinent (British Raj). This essay intends to explore as to whether the British Raj reinforced or eroded the social stratification of roles assigned to men, women and transgender persons. Colonisation refers to physically conquering an area and its inhabitants through the use of force. The term has been defined by Collins English Dictionary as a policy and practice of a power whereby it extends its hegemony over weaker nations and territories. Historical accounts bear testimony to the fact that Britain physically colonised parts of Africa and Asia and established its hegemony over large tracts of land and the residents of the colonies. The British Raj in Indian subcontinent and articulation of it with gender is singularly chosen for this essay. The reason being that the British Raj did more than physical colonisation as this process perpetuated such complex relations between the British colonial masters and the colonised subjects that even after physical decolonisation, the political, economic and social dispensations put in place by the colonial rulers still reign supreme.

As gender discrimination thrives on unequal power relations, societal instruments further embed this inequality through denial to women, access to property and education and also through inhibiting her mobility. Prior to the British Raj, Indian society pursued a multitude of gender repressive rites against women including Sati, a practice of burning of a Hindu wife on her husband's funeral pyre (Sharma, 2001), female infanticide, and child marriage. The rampant discrimination against women and pervasive inequality in the Indian society date back to 200 B.C when the rules prescribing social conduct were propounded by Manu, who is celebrated in Hindu mythology as a legendary author of Sanskrit code of Law titled 'Manusmriti' - Laws of Manu. According to Manu "in childhood a female must be subject to her father, in youth to her husband, when her lord is dead to her sons; a woman must never be independent" (Olivelle, 2005).

The British colonial masters after subjugating India preferred Euro-centric policies in this part of the world. The gender issues which warranted the urgent attention of the colonial rulers remained largely on the back burner, including Sati, restriction on widow remarriage, child marriage, and denial of property rights as well as women's right to education. Understandably, the colonial mindset was motivated, solely, by the notion of overpowering the Indians rather than devising policies aimed at purging the Indian society of its inequities. Despite the over-arching apathy, some measures were belatedly introduced to curtail the extremities perpetrated against women. Sati, according to many Europeans, constituted one of the most horrendous of acts prevalent in Hindu society. The initial British response to Sati was marked by a sense of

ambivalence. However the viciousness associated with the practice somehow jolted the conscience of colonial masters into contemplation afterwards. It was Governor-General Bentick who finally promulgated the law prohibiting Sati in 1829. Major (2006) asserts that in subsequent times, the British continued to take pride in the fact that they had dealt a “decisive blow against one of the cruelest rites ever practiced by superstitious men”. Yet it is believed by many that the reaction of the then British rulers was mere outcome of convergence of ideas at a definite historical occasion. They argue that some Hindu reformists had played a pivotal role in creating an enabling environment where a law prohibiting Sati could be promulgated and effectively enforced.

The enactment of law has historically been attributed to the campaign spearheaded by the Bengali reformer, Raja Ram Mohan Roy who started vociferously championing the cause of banning Sati in 1812. Moved by the incident of witnessing his sister-in-law being compelled to commit Sati, he launched a campaign in Bengal and visited Kolkata's cremation fields to persuade widows against self-immolation and wrote articles to demonstrate that the practice was not in conformity with the teachings of the Hindu Holy Scriptures (Chaurasia, 2002). Some sections of the Hindu society vehemently opposed any government intervention against the rite. This resistance offered by influential Hindus spurred Raja Roy to file a petition for a ban to be imposed on Sati (Dodwel, 1932). Consequently Sati was banned through promulgation of a law in 1829. Some influential segments of Hindu community felt aggrieved of the law and challenged the enactment through a petition carrying signatures of around eight hundred citizens. However the petition was dealt a final blow by the Privy Council, London in 1832, and the ban was upheld (Chakrabarti & Chakrabarti, 2013). In this backdrop, Major (2006), has also endorsed the view that the European impression of Sati was fluid and it was rather influenced by the political and ideological circumstances of the era than reflecting moral response of a civilised West.

Though British rulers were able to contain female infanticide and also enhance the age of consent for marriage yet, all such interventions were not conceived with legitimate concerns (Smith, 2008). It is widely believed that the institution of dowry was reinforced in the then Indian society with ulterior motives. Traditionally, parents used to offer valuable gifts to their daughters, as they used to give to their sons and these gifts were for the bride and not intended for husband or his family, to serve as a tool for her financial independence after marriage. The British colonial authority initially introduced a law thus banning women to own any property at all. The controversial law transformed the dowry into a ‘treasure-hunt’ (Nayyar, 2004).

The colonial mindset promoted male dominance of the Hindu man in India. Hindu men were accordingly spurred to earn more money through recruitment in the army. Similarly, they were provided with more legal authority in marital affairs and were vested with the ownership of inherited property. On the contrary, the ‘Bengali man’ was targeted with the utmost degradation, as he was incessantly portrayed as a ‘weak, feeble and delicate being’. Bengali men were made to endure this racial turmoil because of the fact that the British were wary of their productivity level (Kusari, 2015).

In addition, eunuchs (*hijras*) who before the British rule were often employed as guardians of the wives of the nobility were also maltreated by the British rulers. They were considered worthy of high status previously but the advent of the British Raj proved disastrous for them. The British considered them ‘dreadful and vile’ beings and even classified them as criminals in the Criminal Tribes Act of 1871 (Gust, 2014). This led the entire generation of transgender into misery and they were condemned with impunity to face distressing economic woes. Today after almost 100 years they have been granted the legal right to vote.

In the end, we may conclude that discrimination and inequality historically marked the Indian society and the colonial rule only accentuated gender repression. Though the British Raj managed to save Indian women from practices such as Sati, and female infanticide, but failed to prevent them from the horrors and oppression caused by the caste system in pre-partition India. Even actions taken by the British colonial masters against some social menaces were driven by the outcry raised by Hindu reformers. Ironically, the British rulers not only supported the Caste system, but used it as a legal tool for the subjugation of Indians especially women on a larger scale. Resultantly, women in India are still considered to be inferior to their male counterparts and treated as subservient to men. Hence the colonial rulers not only acknowledged gender roles, but also solidified discrimination and inequity that were traditionally prevalent in pre-partition Indian society, thus adversely affecting the female population. In addition, transgender and some classes of men representing the marginalised sections of the society were also discriminated against giving rise to far reaching and long lasting impacts on the gender relations in the Indian society.

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Ramsha Masood Ahmad is the student of M.Sc Development Studies at Pakistan Institute of Development Economics.