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TIMELESS INDIA



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# The British Interregnum



CENTRE FOR POLICY STUDIES CHENNAI

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## India Goes into Eclipse

The British began establishing a foothold in India from the mid-eighteenth century, by the mid-nineteenth they had taken over the administration of the whole of India; and they continued to rule India for another hundred years. India had suffered foreign invaders and rulers earlier, especially since the beginning of the second millennium of Christ. Those invasions lowered the vitality and dignity of India; but they could not subdue the Indian spirit. Indians continued to be proud of the affluence of their lands, and the superiority of their civilisation. In their mind, they remained steadfast in *sanatana dharma*, in their time tested and timeless civilisational discipline and pursuits.

The British interregnum led to great

neglect of the wealth that nature has so bountifully bestowed upon India; and the high skills of the Indian people of converting the nature's bounty to material and social affluence began to rust away. But more than the material decline, the British period led to an eclipse of the soul of India. Perhaps for the first time in their long history, Indians began to entertain doubts about the truth and superiority of their time honoured ways and preferences. Mahatma Gandhi did reawaken the Indian spirit to an extent through his emphasis on *swadeshi* and *swadharma*; but the stupor introduced by the British is yet to disappear entirely. India needs a new and vigorous movement in favour of *swadeshi* and *swadharma* to come out of this phase of eclipse and begin to shine across the world once again.



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## Agriculture Goes into Precipitous Decline

The great agricultural affluence of India was perhaps the first to be affected by the British rule. The affluence was based upon painstaking tending of the lands, careful husbanding of the waters, and affectionate upkeep of the animals. Under the British, all this became impossible. Productivity of agriculture in the Chengalpattu region, which was one of the first parts of India to come under British administration, began to decline almost immediately. In 1770's, Chengalpattu produced 2.5 tons per hectare and the yield had remained around that level up to 1780's, in spite of the devastating wars of the period. But by 1798, within

a few years of direct British administration, productivity had declined to a mere 630 kg per hectare.

Agriculture in all parts of India suffered the same fate. It is generally agreed that throughout the nineteenth century agricultural productivity in India either declined or stagnated at a low level. Detailed statistical information began to be collected from 1890 onwards, and it indicates a continuing decline up to 1947. At the end of the British rule, the average yield of paddy in India had declined to one ton per hectare, wheat to 650 kg per hectare, and coarse grains to far below that figure.



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## Scarcity takes the Place of Plenty

India has always been a land of abundance in grain. This abundance was soon replaced by acute scarcity under the British. Perhaps for the first time in her long history, India failed to produce enough food for her people and animals. And devastating famines began to visit large parts of India decade after decade.

Chengalpattu District of Tamil Nadu produced a ton of grain per capita in the 1770's. Detailed statistical data collected in 1890 showed per capita production in

the country to be merely 200 kg. At the time of independence production of grain in India was at an alarmingly low level of 150 kg per capita per year.

The Famine Commission of 1880 had determined that a minimum of 200 kg per capita of foodgrains was required to keep people from starving. India today produces just about 200 kg per capita per year.

We are still far away from the abundance of pre-British India. We have still not been able to undo the effects of two centuries of subjugation under the British.



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## Industry and Manufacture are Wiped Out

Agriculture went into decline during the British rule, while the Indian industry was totally wiped out. Chengalpattu District of Tamil Nadu, for which detailed data are available, had only half its population engaged exclusively in agriculture in the 1770's. The census of 1870 showed that 80 percent of the people of Chengalpattu had become entirely dependent on agriculture. Such was the decline of opportunities in the industrial and service activities.

Up to 1800 India was the largest producer and exporter of textiles. Within the first three decades of the nineteenth century, Indian textiles were completely wiped out from the international markets. The pages of history are blackened with the accounts

of severe suffering of the unemployed spinners and weavers of Bengal in the first half of the nineteenth century.

In 1750 India produced a quarter of the manufactures of the world; and even in 1800, India held one-fifth share in the world manufacturing output. However, by 1860 the share of India had declined to 8.6 percent, it further declined to 2.8 percent in 1880 and 1.4 percent in 1913. Such was the level of de-industrialisation of India. India's share in the gross product of the world declined from 22.6 percent in 1700, to 15.7 percent in 1820, 11.0 percent in 1890 and 3.8 percent in 1952. China and other countries of the world that came under European grip also suffered similar decline.



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## India loses its Share in the World Population

With agriculture and industry suffering precipitous decline, India began to lose its predominant position in the population of the world. Even in 1700, Indians formed the largest civilisational group in the world. They constituted 26% of the world population, ahead of the Chinese at 23%. By 1820 the share of the Indian region in the world population had declined to 20%, in 1900 it declined further to 14%. In 1950, at the end of the British interregnum, the Indian share had somewhat improved to 17.5%.

Not only the Indians, but all the non-European people suffered severe decline in their presence in the world during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. For most of history, the Europeans were a relatively small group in the world. It is only from 1500AD onwards, with the beginning of American colonisation, that the Europeans began to grow, but their numbers remained below those of Indians and the

Chinese till 1750. By 1875, the people of European stock became the largest civilisational group in the world; and in 1925, at the peak of western imperialism, their numbers reached more than double that of the Indians and about one and a half times that of the Chinese. Thus in about 200 years the complexion of the world was changed; a world that was dominated by the Indians and the Chinese, became a European world.

The recent rise in population of India and China, as also of the rest of Asia and Africa, represents a natural restoration of balance between the numerical strength of different civilisations. The Indian growth in this recent period, though impressive, is not the most spectacular. Other Asians and the Africans have grown at a pace faster than we have. Notwithstanding this growth, people of European stock continue to be a third of the world population and the largest group in the world.

