Arrival of the British in the Punjab

(mid-19th c.)

Prakash Tandon


Indians were somewhat accustomed (by no means happily, in most cases) to being controlled by outsiders, so the arrival of the British did not have quite the immediate impact that it might have had elsewhere. Even after the arrival of the British, village life in India continued, as it had for centuries, to be dominated by traditional patterns of caste, leadership, and social norms. Caste rules branded Muslims, Christians, Sikhs and others as outsiders, and most types of interaction were severely regulated for Hindus.

Life in the Punjab, a province of northwestern India, was somewhat different. There, the population included a high proportion of not only Hindus, but also Sikhs and Muslims. Everyday life was filled with contact with other groups, out of necessity. Not surprisingly, caste rules often were applied differently than they were in areas totally dominated by Hindus. In this selection from *Punjabi Century,* Prakash Tandon writes of the arrival of the British in the Punjab, as well as the caste system.

The Punjabis, as old people used to say, were puzzled at the first sight of the Englishmen because they had never seen any people look so implausible. They were used to Pathans, and some of their own people were fair, occasionally with light hair and grey eyes — we had a cousin with ginger hair and a skin that reddened instead of tanning, which he considered a great misfortune, as he was always compared to the posterior of a monkey! But never had they seen people so incredibly red-faced, and dressed in such quaint tight clothes displaying their bottoms so indecently. Never had they seen women who went about barefaced in equally incredible clothes, and spoke to strangers with the confidence of men. Their children they found unbelievably beautiful.

The villagers were, to begin with, frightened of the new conquerors. Women would hide their children. But fear soon gave way to curiosity and then to controversy. What were these Angrezi up to? Their ideas were quite unlike those of rulers in the past. They began by doing the oddest things, like consulting each peasant about the land he possessed and giving him a permanent title to it, with a fixed revenue which was remitted in years when crops were bad. The officers moved about freely, unguarded and without pomp and show. The visiting officials pitched their tents outside the villages, and held their office under a tree where anyone could approach them. Accompanied by just one or two persons they would ride on horseback for hours, inspecting and talking to people. Most of them had learned Punjabi well, some quite fluently. Their women, whom we soon began to call mem sahibs, also moved about freely, asking the village women and children questions. The officers and their wives had insatiable curiosity about our habits and customs and seemed never to tire of getting to know us. Their manners were strange but kindly and considerate, seldom hectoring or bullying. In their dress, manner or speech there was nothing of the rulers, as we were used to, and yet it was soon obvious that there was no authority lacking, and that they had a peppery temper.

I think what impressed our elders most, and what they still spoke about when I was young, was that in the past there had been rulers who were virtuous and mindful of the rayats welfare, but never a whole system of government that was bent to public good, with no apparent personal benefit to its officers. These and many other things at first intrigued the people, and later pleased them.

We Punjabis were fortunate in escaping the rule of the East India Company. . . . In this virgin field, with no regrets from the past, the government settled down to the task in which our family, like many others, was to play a small part, of building an administration; giving the province a new judiciary; for the first time a police; instituting land records and a revenue system; education department; building irrigation canals which changed deserts into granaries; and providing many other services that laid the foundation of a peaceful and prosperous countryside. It was a benevolent bureaucracy which gave much opportunity for building and therefore attracted men who liked pioneering under conditions of scope and power.

When I was at school our textbooks dividing Indian history into three periods, Hindu, Muslim, and British, ended with a short chapter ˝Angrezi Raj ki Barkaten˝ — Blessings of the English Raj. This was also a standard question in our examinations. There was a list of about a dozen blessings like law and order, irrigation canals, roads and bridges, schools, railways, telegraph and public health. In my generation these things were taken for granted, but my father used to explain that while he, too, was born in an era of peace, to his elders the new law and order really meant something. . . . The British soldiers [unlike other conquering soldiers] were simple, and instead of helping themselves paid fancy prices. If our generation began to be amused at the textbook blessings of the British Raj, my grandfather's generation took them seriously and praised them unreservedly. So did my father and his generation, at least to begin with.

At the time my father began his career, the service rules, like the Indian caste system, were clearly defined, well understood and fully accepted. You accepted them as the natural order of things. There were three grades in service, virtually like the Hindu castes, because entry was preordained and determined by birth. There was a grade for the British-born, which was the seniormost; followed by a middle grade for the locally born British, pure or mixed; and a junior grade for Indians, irrespective of their caste. Between the English-born and the Indian-born British we were unable to make a distinction. They all looked the same, spoke the same language and seemed to live alike. The difference was too subtle for us to appreciate. It could only be inferred that those who were born in England belonged to superior families and received better education than their local kinsmen and therefore were better qualified for superior posts; but strangely enough, the locally born talked of "home" with the same nostalgia.

Glossary

*Raj* "Rule" or "reign," as in the British "Raj."