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## Victorian Colonial India

The British colonial Indian environment preceding Gandhi's birth was disturbing yet promising at the same time. The Indian Mutiny of 1857 against the oppressive British regime was suppressed; as a result, Indian spirit was crushed, their self-esteem wounded, the economy ruined, and the whole country submerged in deep despair. Although the British now had no choice but to relent their policies a little by granting special favors and Western educational opportunities to a few eligible Indian elite, their overall attitude to Indians remained that of a sahib to a servant—arrogant and overbearing or patronizing and scornful by turns. This problematic British attitude generated four major Indian responses to the British, which played a critical role in shaping Gandhi's responses to the British and the British rule.

### FOURFOLD INDIAN RESPONSE TO THE BRITISH

In his book *Colonialism, Tradition and Reform* (1989), Bhikhu Parekh suggests four broad categories of “Hindu Responses to British Rule” (between 1820–1920): modernism, traditionalism, critical modernism, and critical traditionalism. These responses provided the basic conceptual framework within which Gandhi formulated his own unique response.

The modernists were convinced that modernity was incompatible with the old Indian civilization and culture; they suggested a clean break with all things traditional—its plural, rural, feudal governing system, orthodox

religious beliefs, sectarianism, caste barriers, and narrow parochialism. The younger Gandhi tended to be a modernist who emulated the British lifestyle and manners, as discussed later in this book.

The modernists came under heavy fire, however, from the traditionalists, who called them traitors, copy-cats, sycophants, and even the brown sahibs. Convinced that India was in its present sorry state of affairs because of the English, Muslim, and other foreign invaders, the traditionalists denounced them all. They thought that compared to their glorious, ancient Indian civilization, the European civilization was barbaric, inferior, and morally bankrupt. Consisting largely of upper-caste orthodox Hindus, this group used the scriptures to justify and maintain caste barriers and unso-ciability. They even forbade anyone to cross the black seas to go to Europe for higher education; violators were ostracized. (Young Gandhi with his entire family was excommunicated for his daring to go to England for higher studies.)

The third group of responders comprised critical modernists or syn-cretists. They advocated a judicious combination of Indian moral values and European political values, of the Western scientific spirit of rational inquiry and the Eastern mystical inquiry into the human spirit. They were great reformers, such as Raja Ram Mohun Roy, Keshab Chandra Sen, Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, Gopal Krishna Gokhale and others, whom I shall discuss in more detail later.

The fourth category of responses consisted of the critical traditionalists like Bankim Chandra Chatterjee (in later times), B. C. Pal, Shri Aurobindo, and Swami Vivekananda, of whom the latter had a profound influence on Gandhi. Unlike the critical modernists who advised borrowing the good from other cultures and rejecting the bad, the critical traditionalists suggested that each person first rethink and revise his or her own tradition from deep within and then get rid of whatever seemed to be irrational or obsolete. Unlike those New Age proponents who knowingly or unknowingly held the European civilization to be superior, the critical traditionalists upheld their own civilization, valued their culture, and suggested only to eliminate the diseased, dysfunctional, or dead parts.

### GANDHI AS A CRITICAL TRADITIONALIST

Although the younger Gandhi tended to be a modernist, we shall witness his gradual metamorphosis into a critical traditionalist later in the book. Gandhi's role as a critical traditionalist needs special attention as most of his

leadership style and ideals emanated from his deep, yet not blind devotion to his own Indian tradition. Gandhi loved Hinduism, but he was not an orthodox Hindu, or as Bhikhu Parekh (1989) put it, “though Gandhi valued tradition, he was not a traditionalist.” Unlike most other critical traditionalists, Gandhi diagnosed the disease of the Indian degeneration as a severe moral decline of the Hindu character. Whereas other critical traditionalists pointed the finger of blame at the British, Gandhi turned it toward his own countrymen who had lost their physical, intellectual, and moral courage, and therefore lacked character. Gandhi firmly believed that when the character of the people falls, the nation falls. As a critical traditionalist, he resembled his spiritual predecessor, Swami Vivekananda—the monk-disciple of the sage Ramakrishna of Calcutta—who regretted the loss of Indian social and moral conscience.

### SWAMI VIVEKANANDA’S INFLUENCE ON GANDHI

Speaking at the Parliament of World Religions in Chicago in 1893, the saffron-robed Swami Vivekananda first introduced Vedanta to the West and mesmerized Westerners by his fiery personality and matchless eloquence. Swami Vivekananda was the first one to awaken his fellow Indians from their deep slumber with his inspiring words: “Arise! Awake! Rest not till the goal is achieved,” the goal being to gain freedom from the foreign British yoke. He exhorted his countrymen to straighten their backs so no foreigner could ride on them. A few years later, Gandhi, too, would admonish his people, saying that the reason the British ruled India was because Indians allowed them to do so. Time and again Vivekananda reminded Indians to be “mighty lions” and “not meek lambs.” Above all, what the Swami instilled in his fellow Indians was the spirit of nationalistic pride and vigor based on their own unique spiritual heritage of the *Vedas*, *Upanishads*, and *Vedanta*; Swami Vivekananda’s spiritualistic nationalism greatly inspired Gandhi. Moreover, like Vivekananda, Gandhi not only identified with the poor millions of India, but he, more than any other leader, continued the Swami’s unfinished work of serving the poor and downtrodden as the *Daridra-Narayana* or “God of the Poor.” Although Gandhi did not directly mention his indebtedness to Vivekananda, as Bhikhu Parekh observed (1989), he was deeply influenced by the latter’s ideas of national unity, religious harmony, service to the poor, and cultivating “manliness.” To become as “manly as a mighty Englishman” was the motto of every young Indian in British India, and young Gandhi was no

exception. He would change that later, however, by reinterpreting the meaning of "manliness."

## GANDHI AND THE COLONIAL STEREOTYPES

If the younger Gandhi fell prey to the colonial stereotypes of "manly Englishman" and "feminine Indian," the more mature Gandhi fought against it; he rewrote the entire negative colonial script of "Indian effeminacy" with a new one of "positive androgyny." As Ashish Nandy observed (1983, 54), "Gandhi's nationalism ... undermines the imperialist ethos of hyper-masculinity by de-linking courage and activism from aggression and violence and making them compatible with femininity." Gandhi drew upon the ancient Hindu concepts of *Sakti* (positive androgyny), or dynamic womanhood, which is an alternative model of masculinity. He strategically harnessed this spiritual feminine power of "suffering love" and "nonviolent courage" into his *satyagrahas* and thus redefined the very concept of "manliness." Women represented the power of *tapasya* (spiritual forbearance), which is more potent and healing than brutal power. To Gandhi, "the power of the sword was as zero before the power of the soul." Both in himself, and in his political campaigns, Gandhi made creative use of feminine spiritual strengths, thereby helping to change not only the male stereotypes (of colonial India) but also restoring the positive images of femininity of the *Vedic* and *Upanishadic* Hinduism.

## PREDECESSORS PAVE THE WAY

In rewriting the negative colonial script, however, Gandhi was not alone, nor was he the first Indian leader-reformer to undertake the task of national regeneration. Many a brilliant reformer before him had brooded over the current moral degeneration of India under British colonial rule and had paved the way for him. In imperceptible ways Gandhi was inspired by those reformers' fervent nationalism, their social and religious reformist zeal, and their examples of selfless work and devotion to India. Because of their shining light, which pierced through the darkness and turmoil of the post-Mutiny period, the skies looked brighter in the second half of the nineteenth century. It was the British Orientalism movement that first sparked off the Hindu cultural and religious renaissance, giving birth to many reformist movements all across India.

## BRITISH ORIENTALISM SPREADING TO EUROPE AND AMERICA

The years from 1772 to 1830 under British colonial rule in India can be described as the golden era of Orientalism, which fired up the imagination of a group of “acculturated civil, military and judicial officials,” according to David Kopf (1969). Through their painstaking study of Sanskrit, this earliest batch of English scholars—William Jones, Charles Wilkins, Thomas Colebrooke, and William Carey—discovered the spiritual wisdom of the *Vedas*, the *Upanishads*, and the *Bhagavad Gita*; they also translated into English the two Hindu epics of *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, the *Puranas* and other sacred Sanskrit texts. The wind of British Orientalism spread from England to Germany (Muller, Schopenhauer). It also swept over America, giving rise to the transcendental movement spearheaded by Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau. The Oriental movement received additional reinforcement from the Theosophical movement in England (Madame Blavatsky, Annie Besant), which would later kindle the young law student Gandhi’s interest in his own religions, especially Hinduism and Buddhism.

## HINDU CULTURAL-RELIGIOUS RENAISSANCE AND REFORMIST MOVEMENTS

Nationally, India was awakening in herself; psychologically and culturally, she was awakening in her people. New winds of change were blowing and reform was in the air. The two-way process of acculturation or intercultural borrowing, initiated by British Orientalists, was now being reciprocated by British-influenced Indian intellectuals who set the whole nation afire with their reformist zeal. As a part of the Hindu cultural and religious renaissance, various reformist movements flourished all across India, but Bengal became the very hub of a sociocultural and religious revolution. Bengali reformers like Rammohun Roy, Ishwar Chandra, Keshab Chandra Sen, Radhakant Deb, Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, and others were particularly drawn to the newfound ideas of freedom, justice, and equality. “Rammohun Roy, one of the most fascinating and complex Indians to have emerged during the Orientalist period,” (Kopf 1969, 196) was the founder-editor of the *Sambad Kaumudi*—a Brahmmanical magazine. He wrote fiery editorials on “the Folly of caste,” the “abolition of the Hindu custom of *suttee*,” and

the “rights of women.” He also founded the *Brahmo Samaj*, the “cornerstone of Hindu reformation movement.” Similarly, in Saurashtra (now a part of Gujarat), Dayanand Saraswati founded the *Arya Samaj*; like Roy, he opposed idol-worship. Another radical reformer of Gujarat, Veer Narmad practiced what he preached and married a widow himself. Besides these, a host of other Indian reformer-nationalists who preceded Gandhi and influenced him included Dadabhai Naoroji, called the “Grandshire of Indian Nationalism,” Bal Gangadhar Tilak, Aurobindo Ghose, and Gopal Krishna Gokhale.

### GANDHI'S DISTINCT IMPRINT ON HIS TIMES

Although some of the nineteenth-century Hindu reformers profoundly influenced Gandhi, he set his own style and put his own distinct mark on his *yuga* (epoch) to regenerate himself and his people, and to free his beloved India from British bondage. He created his own concoction of spiritual nationalism based on social reforms, religious openness, and an all-encompassing humanity in order to seek first his own true identity, and in that process, the identity of his people. We may also note here that though Gandhi worked all his life to purge Hinduism of excrescences such as unsociability, caste barriers, religious sectarianism, and racial prejudices, he was never an iconoclast like Dayanand Saraswati, nor a demythologizer like Raja Rammohan Roy. More like Swami Vivekananda, Gandhi firmly believed in retaining his own Hindu tradition and in revitalizing and reinterpreting it in the context of his time.

Deriving inspiration from the precepts and examples of his predecessors, Gandhi would later lead a bloodless moral and spiritual revolution from the grass roots level and not just the elite level. Gandhi envisioned life, to use his own metaphor, “not as a pyramid with the apex sustained by the bottom,” but rather, as an “oceanic circle whose center was the individual.” Thus, Gandhi's reformist approach was not only more comprehensive than that of any of his predecessors but also more pragmatic and democratic to involve people at the grass roots; he was convinced that what India needed at the time was moral and spiritual regeneration.