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The British Industrialization and Colonization of India: A Constructive Look at Gender Inequality

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Unquestionably, the study of history has always been lacking relating to the inclusion of women and people of other genders than male—specially of Anglo-Saxen decent. Therefore, archeological research on colonized nations of Great Britain has been lacking quality qualitative evidence conducted using primary source documents of the colonized. Within the context of Colonial India, it is ever prevalent that historians fail to recognize social contexts predating colonialization and their implications on society moving forward for the nation. Specifically, the role of women—an already under-researched discipline of history—is often misunderstood within the context of Hindu and Muslim cultures both before and after European involvement. The concept of basing theories on primary sources and regional context is a form of constructivism. Constructivism is a new-school ideology centered in the social sciences regarding research, experimental data, and ethical pilfering from other nations.

And so, European influence counterintuitively affected the role of women positively, both Native inhabitants and Colonizers in Colonial India, in which new ideals and cultural norms were drafted surrounding motherhood, women in the workplace, and domesticity. What was the role of women during Colonial India? Were Western ideals liberating or more conservative to native Indian people? How has the power of homemaking and domesticity by women helped preserve Indian cultures? How were British colonial women affected during this era? The main academic discipline used to support the presented argument is historical constructivism. The primary purpose is to create a conglomerate of primary sources and native Indian academic

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discourse. All the sources used are either from primary letters, native Indian dissertations, or previous staples within Colonial Indian literature that will be called into question. The author's intent and personal biases are particularly important in discovering the validity of research based on an isolated group's society and culture. While the implications of colonialism are hazy, this argument is not a justification or erasure of the brutalities faced by Indian peoples being subjugated to British rule. Instead, its purpose is to show the complexities of feminism and women's roles during the changing cultures on Colonial India—most of which are understudied amongst international researchers.

First, there must be a foundation for understanding feminist theory. According to the most accepted forms of historical sociology, before the Industrial Revolution, men and women contributed equally to society—there was no gender tied to work. From England's extensive reach to many parts of the world, their Industrial Revolution affected the culture of many different societies, and with it a new gender system that was pellucid with its hierarchy. Over the century of post-Industrialization, sociologists have depicted four major categories of feminist movements within historical contexts: Liberal Feminism, Marxist Feminism, Radical Feminism, and Postmodern Feminism (Mohajan).

Liberal Feminism is a political movement dependent on individual liberties and protection of an individual's rights. These feminists believe that society has falsely determined that women are less capable intellectually and physically than their male counterparts. Subsequently, they strive for equal pay for equal work; Men and Women are created equal, and women should be hoisted up to the caliber men are withholding (Mohajan).

Marxist Feminism is a 'specialized' form of philosophy that coincides with the economic theories of Karl Marx. Concerned more with the economic classes of women, Maxists believe

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that women should all be economically equal because they can “create” the workforce—for low costs. Patriarchy is bred from capitalism, and so all societal issues around women are because of the nature of capitalism and western ideals. Men are the bourgeoisie that makes profit from the exploitation of the proletariat women (Mohajan).

Radical Feminism is a philosophy popularized within 1960’s urban centers of the United States. Within their ideology, woman and the woman’s spirit are characterized independently of other factors, such as race and economic status within society. They use the depiction of rape and sexual assault as the main ways in which men control women and their bodies within society and legislation. Their perfected society would consist of an all-women commune to escape the power that men have over them. This form is often seen as archaic, even though it is new, because of its insistent need to not allow trans-women, other races, or disabled people into their discussions (Mohajan).

Post Modern Feminism is the newest recorded ideology within social science. Sprouting out of the AIDS crisis and the world record high divorce rates, Post Modern Feminism is deeply rooted in intersectionality and questioning the outside forces that construct gender.

Postmodernist ideals reject common positions found within other forms of feminism and is known colloquially as the “Open Ended Feminism.” As such, they are seen as insipid, and their inclusion might weaken the overall feminist argument (Mohajan).

With this context, researchers can strategically discard modern feministic ideals when researching the societal implications of British colonies. There has been a plethora of modern research dedicated to the reconstruction of education surrounding India within English-speaking countries. Professor of History at the University of Delhi, Charu Gupta states: “Most British colonial and missionary writings viewed the position of women in India before their advent as

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one of extreme degradation... they further claim that the urge for reforms was a result of indigenous efforts and not due simply to British critiques” (Gupta). This contradicts the current teachings that India was underdeveloped and “overly feminine” before the British navy institutionalized British high society within the Indian caste system (Walsh).

From the incoming waves of British society, Indian domestics were the refuge for spirituality and old Indian, both Muslim and Hindu, cultures. Women and their work preserved the “overly feminine” aspects of pre-colonial India. Gupta later states, “Her body [women] became a metaphor for an un-violated, chaste space, the ultimate site of virtue and the last refuge of freedom” (Gupta). With this, the duty of culture is thrust into other society's expectations of women during this time. Without the domestic duties of women most, if not all, of the history surrounding India before colonization would be lost or misunderstood in a museum offshore.

It was not only native indigenous women of India that catalyzed the addition of responsibilities to the domestic sphere. Many educated British women took it upon themselves to start clubs as a “mini-society” they could use to meet, educate, and lead others legally. According to Rosemary Raza, a professor at Oxford University, British women who colonized India were treated very similarly to the domestic Hindi and Muslim women in India. They state, “The Anglo-Indian society over which they presided was always a distorted reflection of Britain... The hierarchal structure of the East India Company’s administration intimately affected women, who acquired their husband’s rank and status on marriage.” They continue by giving the credit of the hierarchy of Anglo-India to the participation of British women in it. Raza also interjects those British women of the East India Company enforced the social pressures between army wives and civilians. In a primary quote by Julia Maitland, a British writer and colonizer, “The civil ladies are generally very quiet, rather languid, speaking almost in a whisper,

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simply dressed, almost always ladylike and *comm-il-faut*...The military ladies, on the contrary, are always quite young, pretty, noisy, affected, showily dressed, with a great many ornaments, *mauvais ton*...and all together what you may call ‘Low Toss’.” The plight of women was muffled through the pitting against each other by British society. Women were always women—no matter their race.

Because of this newfound sisterhood, British Women found a way to educate and meet with other women of their communities. Cultural researcher Benjamin Cohen writes in a special edition of a popular peer-edited journal, *Networks of Sociability*, “Women’s clubs in India served as homes away from home for women... provided Indian and British women alike with a safe space where their interests could find greater freedom” (Cohen). Domesticity and education reached a depth that was regardless of skin color or economic status, which is one of the earliest forms of feminism recorded in the English-speaking world. It is contrarian to equate domesticity and feminism within today’s context, but for millions of women—domesticity gave them adorations and freedoms never before seen.

Formally educated men, both English and Indigenous to India, also began distributing knowledge to Indigenous women. While many intentions were lost, Dr. Banerjee, a renown Indian Cultures researcher and professor states, “women in Colonial Bengal were prescribed manuals on how to be a good wife and wise mother.” Unlike past scripture and religious texts, these writings were secular and targeted to a new form of literate women throughout the caste system. Banerjee especially talks about the tone of language in these manuals. Contrary to expectation the tone of these manuals has hardly any difference to the tone of the scriptures that came before it—like Manu Samhit. Some were very apparent instructions regarding health, the home, and sex to name a few, while others were given anecdotal roots. Like a conversation

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between a father and daughter or letters between a husband and wife. The context was always full of the “characteristics of a good middle-class wife” as Dr. Banerjee puts it. This includes how a new wife should behave in their in-law's household, a responsibility to hygiene, and an apt agreement with punctuality. Lastly, they clearly defined the hierarchy within an ideal middle-class home. The head woman was the wife of the *Karta* or the oldest male within the family unit (Banerjee).

Within primary documents, there is evidence of laws changing to cater to the livelihood of women. This includes The Hindu Widow's Right of Succession and The Hindu Widows' Remarriage Act. Within traditional Hindu law—many of the laws India was not secularized yet—a widow could only maintain an estate after the passing of her husband if there was “no son, son's son, or son's son's son to take over the land” (Krishnamurty). From the outcry of women's clubs and high society women alike, the judiciary drafted an act to change the laws regarding widows remarrying within India and Hindu scripture alike. The Hindu Widows' Remarriage Act saw the ability to remarry as long as the widow relinquished most of her former estate and promised to conceive no children with the new husband. This shows the unstable position women were in during this era and the promise to better the lives of those the laws had prejudices against.

From the newly transfigured laws surrounding women to the spiritual responsibilities given to women within Hinduism, is very apparent that the role of women was widen with the induction of domesticity—unlike many other colonized nations of Great Britain. Furthermore, it is very apparent that the inclusion of British women within social sects of Colonial India, has improved the lifestyle of Indigenous women by educating the populace on women's autonomy, specifically menstruation and its implications with religion. Indigenous Women also found non-

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domestic jobs within India's Jute industry, "despite the increasing gender segregation, women were not exclusively departmentalized as they were in reeling and winding in cotton textile mills...there was no task that was considered 'women's' or... feminine." With this, women have won the right to be harbingers of their religion, of the home, and of their pocketbook (Walsh).

Conversely, there are genuine concerns with the argument that industrialization promoted social inclusion and humanitarianism for women. Many humanitarians believe that colonization is a form of terrorism and ethnic cleansing, with which the argument is not intended to contradict this harsh reality of indigenous people and culture. However, the proposed research is intended to uncloud the murkiness of Indian History by allowing Indian voices to be heard on the implications of gender and society. The steps taken during this era were minute, but they were still steps that India was not taking before the inclusion of British society. As constructivist theory suggests, when researching specific points of history, it is beneficial to fully understand that the modern forms of society are implanted within a researcher's mind, which skews the data and evidence of all conclusions. With this consideration, one can understand history's complexities in a different context. Still, there could be understandable shortcomings in the researcher's standpoint. I am a white American male who is pursuing an undergraduate degree. While it is my utmost responsibility to the conducted research to have an educated unbiased position within the paper, I am sure that I lack the lived experience of the parties affected to properly encapsulate the entire issue.

Moreover, the unaltered view of feminism during Industrialization will further preserve and express Indian culture pre-colonialization—especially regarding the roles of women within the predominately Hindu and Muslim society. From a world with culture taken overseas, it is especially important to mend the plight of millions of people lost to history. The most ethical

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way to achieve this is within a constructivist ideology. Thus, the argument, European influence counterintuitively affected the role of women positively, both Native inhabitants and Colonizers, in Colonial India; in which new ideals and cultural norms were drafted surrounding motherhood, women in the workplace, and domesticity, is followed by the primary and secondary accounts of people profoundly affected by the colonization of India.

Concurrently, primary, and secondary accounts provide the positive ways in which colonization affected the social world of women and womanly figures within India during the time. With this information, how feminism has grown and how to be more effective with democratic consolidation within newly free states becomes more apparent. Not every humanitarian movement is all or nothing or moves exponentially. Furthermore, the argument shows how horizontal movement is still movement within a society and how we can better understand ourselves and others when broadening our expectations for social reform.

Lastly, the argument has further pushed the scholarly conversation by granting a stage for many diverse sources concluding a narrative that contradicts the current literature taught by Great Britain concerning India—both as a colony and as a free state today.

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