

# Historical Linkages between Colonialism and the Anthropocene in India

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## Abstract

This essay explores the intricate linkages between colonial acts of power and administration and the Anthropocene, an era marked by profound human-induced environmental changes. The study highlights the historical connections between colonialism and the Anthropocene to show how European colonial powers' exploitative practices, such as resource extraction, land-use changes, and infrastructural developments, significantly contributed to the environmental and ecological transformations defining the Anthropocene epoch. The findings offer insights into the comprehensive role played by colonialism in invoking the era of the Anthropocene.

**Keywords:** Anthropocene, colonialism, exploitation, resource extraction, land-use pattern changes, infrastructural development, railways

## Introduction

Colonialism is the true parent of the Anthropocene. The European invaders' exploitation and destruction of indigenous communities and practices left a lasting impression on the environment, shaping the course of human-induced environmental change. The beginning of colonialism in India can be traced back to the Portuguese in the 15th century which further led to the establishment of British rule in the 19th century, which is considered to be the primary force of colonial power in India mainly due to the extent of changes that occurred during its rule. On the other hand, the Anthropocene represents a significant moment in the earth's history when human actions have become a prominent factor in shaping the earth's environmental and geological processes. In the 19th century, colonial acts of power portrayals and exploitative administrative practices proved to be the primary cause for the beginning of the Anthropocene in the Indian context.

## Resource Extraction and Exploitation

The first effects of colonialism came in the form of exploitation of the natural wealth available in abundance in India. It inevitably forced India which was a land of agricultural prosperity and mineral abundance, to primarily work towards fulfilling the British interests. The acts of exploitation were initially direct, wherein raw materials such as cotton, jute, and indigo were regularly supplied to the British mainland to be utilised in the textile industries. Minerals necessary for industrialisation such as iron ore, mica, coal, and agricultural goods such as tea, spices, rice, and wheat produced in rich-fertile lands of India were also exported to be used by the Britishers. While the lucrative opium trade was controlled by The East India Company, especially trade with China; a shortage in the natural resource of timber also turned the focus of the colonial authorities towards the western ghats.

While the concept of 'free trade' was introduced to combat the earlier practice of mercantilism, it is ironic how the same concept was used to justify the economic drain of India. Despite other acts by the colonial power, the biggest hit to the Indian treasury occurred when Britain made India pay for the war expenses incurred by it during World War I. S.G. Panandikar, an Indian economist, pointed out that India occupied second place (after England) in the British Empire for its expenditure during the war.

### **Land-Use Changes**

India before the arrival of colonial power was primarily an agrarian economy that practiced subsistence agriculture. However, the introduction of Britishers to Indian lands led to drastic changes in the ways land came to be utilised. The transition from subsistence farming to commercial farming was the most prominent, where large-scale plantations of cash crops such as coffee, tea, cotton, indigo, and rubber were introduced to be essentially exported. Among the crops that were encouraged by the British to be produced by the local peasants, Indigo emerged to be the most controversial. On one hand, indigo was crucial for the manufacture of dyes in the textile industries whereas, on the other hand, indigo cultivation aggravated environmental issues by contributing to soil erosion, water pollution, and infertility of the soil. It is also crucial to note that only two crops of indigo could be produced in a year, which further exacerbated the financial condition of the farmers. Incessant mining to procure valuable mineral resources led to damage to land in terms of fertility, productivity, and usage. It restricted its usage for agricultural purposes at a time when the land resource was already diminishing due to unhealthy agricultural practices introduced by the colonial rule. Urbanisation and industrialisation were the final straws, which inevitably led to a complete and irreversible change in India's landscape and economy.

### **Infrastructural Development**

Even though the infrastructural development that occurred during the colonial era painted a positive picture characterised by cultural and geographic connectivity and unity and easier transportation access, it served as a means to extract resources, maintain control and facilitate economic exploitation. The vast railway network constructed during the colonial period is considered to be among the biggest achievements of that time. The aim behind building such an extensive railway network was to allow transportation of raw materials and goods from the interior regions to the ports to be exported and to maintain administrative control over the entire region with a special focus on quick army mobilisation during situations of emergencies. As part of a strategic reserve, military forces used to be stationed near railway hubs or marshaling yards. These reserves used to be swiftly recruited in times of emergency to respond to unanticipated threats or catastrophes. In locations where military mobilization was considerable, more security measures were enforced, disrupting people's daily lives. These measures involved heightened monitoring, roadblocks, and mobility restrictions. Military mobilization potentially disrupted social and cultural traditions in impacted areas. This encompassed community dislocation as well as the disturbance of local customs and ways of life. Roads and highways were also built to connect regions that were not connected before with similar intentions of increasing access and establishing power. But to establish such large networks of transportation, huge pieces of land had to be acquired and cleared. Such rampant deforestation consequently disrupted the local ecosystems. Railway lines fragmented natural habitats, making migration more difficult for species and contributing to biodiversity loss. Such alteration of the natural habitats to facilitate the construction of railway lines especially in regions such as hills and valleys, increased the risks of landslides and soil erosion. As the railway lines were expanded

allowing accessibility between distant lands, the land area under forests proportionally declined. The railways allowing the movement of goods and people from afar led to increased exposure to outside influences which impacted the traditional practices and inevitably resulted in cultural loss, especially for the Adivasi communities who were based in these lands.

Despite the intentions of the British government, such transportation developments allowed for villages, towns, and cities to join forces, especially during times of national awakenings and revolts during the fight against British rule. It is important to keep in mind that these infrastructural advancements were frequently made at the expense of local communities, the environment, and traditional systems and that they have left a lasting legacy in India's modern infrastructure and transportation systems.

### Conclusion

The ongoing effects of colonialism continue to influence the environmental problems we confront today, underscoring the necessity of identifying and resolving the historical roots of these problems. The exploitative actions of the colonial government such as the extraction of resources, drain of wealth in the form of war expenses, and the introduction of the zamindari system and the advent of the indigo plantations, not only impacted the environment but also influenced the cultural practices of the regions. The railways played a prominent role in further aggravating the fragile environmental conditions by restricting and modifying the land usage patterns. In *The Great Derangement*, Amitav Ghosh has argued: "I would go further and add that the Anthropocene presents a challenge not only to the arts and humanities but also to our common-sense understandings and beyond that to contemporary culture in general." This highlights the importance of comprehending the complex relationships between colonialism and the Anthropocene to solve the environmental and socioeconomic issues of the future.

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