



A young boy sits on the walls of Purana Qila in New Delhi. The 16th century fortress turned into one of Delhi's biggest refugee camps as the capital struggled with a refugee crisis amid spurts of communal rioting.

(Photo by Margaret Bourke-White/The LIFE Picture Collection)

practical strategy, that of creating divisions among the Indians. First they favoured the Hindus, which was only natural. The East India Company had grabbed power not from the Hindu rulers, but from the Muslim. The Hindus were also the largest community in India. They were ahead of Muslims in terms of business and education. So almost everyone the British initially had come in contact with were Hindus—the merchants, zamindars, clerks and other professionals—some ready to serve, others made ready over time. The Muslims, on the other hand, were at a relative disadvantage. It's true that members of both Hindu and Muslim communities took part in the 1857 Indian Rebellion (Sepoy Mutiny), but the Muslims were deemed particularly hostile because of the sepoys' symbolic, and eventually unsuccessful, reinstatement of Mughal ruler Bahadur Shah Zafar.

The Company was also quite distrustful of the emerging class of associates. These people were clever, skilled and the prime recipients of English

education. The British knew well that they were assisting them for their own benefit. The ancestors of these people had once helped the Company in its expansion of power, which basically meant betraying their own country. The Company knew that they could betray again if they had a chance. This emerging class had the characteristics of an educated middle-class, and from their own experience the British knew that however loyal they appeared to be, somewhere in their mind they would harbour a grudge against them for their subjection and a latent ambition to be free again.

This, in fact, was their biggest worry. The Sepoy Munity made it clear that the peasants were not happy at all. They were facing famine and were subjected to torture and coercion by the British-backed zamindars and indigo planters. The British rule was proving to be very unpopular. It caused widespread dissatisfaction among the weavers who lost everything, and the brutal clampdown that followed the mutiny made the sepoys, their relatives and neighbours particularly angry. The middle-class refrained from joining the uprising. A section of them even worked against the rebels considering it to be in their best interests. But there was no guarantee that they wouldn't have a change of heart in the event of a future uprising. There had been sporadic agrarian riots and armed

conflicts here and there, led by monks, fakirs, members of farazi and santal communities, and indigo growers, so the recurrence of a large-scale uprising could not be completely ruled out. And if that indeed happened, and the middle-class youth got involved in it, things could get real messy. The British knew better than to ignore such a possibility, especially after the French Revolution, so they devised a plan to isolate the educated middle-class from the working people. In 1885, about 28 years from the Indian Rebellion, the retired Imperial Civil Service member Allan Octavian Hume (1829-1912) led efforts to found the Indian National Congress, and one of its principal objectives was to cut off the middle-class from the labouring class. The initiative drew support from Lord Dufferin, and quite naturally so.

It is no coincidence that the Congress was primarily made up of university graduates and their support was vital. In an open letter to these graduates, Hume, quite dramatically, expressed his concern that there could be a French Revolution-like upheaval in India too, led by the peasants, and if it really occurred, neither the British nor the new middle-class would be spared.

That the Indian Rebellion had a lasting impact on the British could be understood from the accounts of local administrators of the time. Karl Marx (1818-1883) and Friedrich Engels (1820-1895) rightly assumed from information sourced from British officials that the mutiny was a spontaneous expression of the growing discontent and grievances among the Indians. Engels pointed out that despite feudal elements and medieval values being firmly in place, the revolt had a jarring effect on India's age-old social traditions and relationships, and people were slowly waking up from their hibernation, figuratively speaking. For the British, however, being able to suppress the mutiny was like taking over India all over again, and it didn't improve their status in the slightest.

Introduction of English education was promoted to widen the class divide. Not that everyone waited for state incentive; the emerging middle-class started learning the English language on their own initiative. In 1817, Hindu College started its journey in Kolkata as a private enterprise, and about 40 years down the line, it was turned into a public institution and renamed Presidency College. That was in 1855, two years before the Indian Rebellion. In the year of the rebellion, three universities were established in three major cities of India—Calcutta (now Kolkata), Bombay (now Mumbai), and Madras (now Chennai). These initiatives enabled the middle-class to further consolidate their position, and with the formation of the Indian National Congress, the British now looked to give the class

divide a firm foundation.

Thomas Babington Macaulay (1800-59), who came to India as a law adviser for the East India Company, played an important role in this process as he advocated for state support for English education. During his stay in Kolkata between 1834 and 1838, Macaulay served as chairman of the First Law Commission that prepared the draft of the Indian Penal Code which, despite a number of revisions in later years, is still followed in India. There is no denying that this penal code was designed more to safeguard the interests of the British and affluent Indians than to protect people's right to justice. Macaulay, among other reasons, came to

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India to give legal assistance to this middle-class which was made up of British loyalists with self-serving interests, mostly cut off from the common people, but then he sought to extend educational support to them through his 1835 proposal for state-sponsored English education—a proposal eagerly accepted and executed. Explaining his proposal, Macaulay had famously said that the singular objective of English education was to create a class that would serve as 'interpreters' between the British and the millions of common people. 'Interpreter' was euphemism for agents and lackeys. As expected, English education played a seminal role in dividing the society. Never before had education played such a role in the social history of India. Of course, there had always been divisions among the educated and the non-educated in some form or another, but the idea of using education as a tool of division