Chapter 4: The Colonial Era in India

Questions — Questions and Activities

Q1 What is colonialism? Give three different definitions based on the chapter or on your knowledge.

SOLUTION

The chapter provides a layered understanding of colonialism that supports at least three definitions:

1. Political-territorial definition: Colonialism is the practice where one country takes control of another region, establishes settlements there, and imposes its political, economic, and cultural systems on the native population.

2. Historical-economic definition: Colonialism is the systematic extraction of wealth, natural resources, and labour from a conquered territory for the benefit of the colonising power, as seen in Britain's drain of India's wealth estimated by the economist Utsa Patnaik at 45 trillion US dollars (in today's value) between 1765 and 1938.

3. Cultural-ideological definition: Colonialism is the process by which a dominant power dismantles the indigenous institutions, traditions, education systems, and identity of a conquered people — replacing them with the coloniser's own — often justified by a false 'civilising mission' that portrayed native peoples as 'savage' or 'primitive'.

Answer: Colonialism is the control of one country over another, involving political domination, economic exploitation of resources and wealth, and the imposition of the coloniser's cultural and institutional systems on the colonised people.

Q2 Colonial rulers often claimed that their mission was to 'civilise' the people they ruled. Based on the evidence in this chapter, do you think this was true in the case of India? Why or why not?

SOLUTION

The chapter presents extensive evidence that the 'civilising mission' claim was not true in the case of India.

First, the chapter notes that India was already one of the world's richest and most advanced civilisations before British colonisation, contributing at least one-fourth of world GDP until the 16th century, with flourishing manufacturing, trade, diverse

agriculture, and well-organised local governance (village councils described by Charles Metcalfe as 'little republics').

Second, British rule caused devastating famines — the 1770–72 Bengal famine killed nearly one-third of Bengal's population (about 10 million people) because the Company maintained, and even increased, harsh revenue targets during the famine; across the entire colonial period, an estimated 50–100 million Indians perished in famines.

Third, British economic policy deliberately ruined India's textile and other industries by imposing heavy duties on Indian goods exported to Britain while allowing British goods into India with minimal tariffs, causing India's share of world GDP to fall from over 25% to barely 5% at Independence.

Fourth, India's traditional education (pāṭhaśhālās, madrasās, vihāras) and local self-governance systems were dismantled and replaced by a centralised bureaucracy designed for tax collection, not public welfare, and by Macaulay's English education designed to create 'brown Englishmen' to staff colonial administration cheaply.

The chapter concludes that the European (mostly British) conquest and rule of India was not a civilising mission but a systematic process of subjugation and exploitation carried out with brutal repression when necessary — India's own civilisation was far older than Europe's.

Answer: No. The evidence in the chapter shows that colonial rule caused devastating famines, destroyed India's industries, dismantled traditional governance and education, and drained India's wealth — the opposite of civilising. India already had a thriving civilisation far older than Europe's before colonisation.

Q3 How was the British approach to colonising India different from earlier European powers like the Portuguese or the French?

SOLUTION

The Portuguese were the first Europeans to arrive (1498) and focused on both commerce and religious conversion. They established the Inquisition in Goa in 1560, which severely persecuted Hindus, Muslims, Jews, and suspected converts; forced conversions and destruction of Hindu temples accompanied their rule. They also used naval dominance (the cartaz permit system) to monopolise the spice trade for nearly a century.

The Dutch focused primarily on commercial dominance, especially in the spice

trade, and did not much intervene in the social or religious life of Indians. Their influence was limited after their decisive defeat at the Battle of Colachel (1741) by Travancore under King Marthanda Varma.

The French established trading posts from 1668 and developed strategies later adopted by the British — training Indian sepoys in European military techniques and practising indirect rule through puppet rulers. However, the French were largely content with modest trade and a small colonial footprint, and their ambitions were checked during the Carnatic Wars (1746–1763). Like the Dutch, they generally did not intervene in Indians' religious life.

The British approach was far more systematic and expansive. The East India Company initially disguised itself as mere traders, gradually inserting itself into Indian political conflicts through 'divide and rule', subsidiary alliances, and the Doctrine of Lapse. This transformed a trading company into an imperial power controlling the entire Subcontinent. The British also restructured India's economy, education, law, and governance on a massive scale to serve colonial interests — something no earlier European power had attempted at that scale.

Answer: The Portuguese combined commerce with aggressive religious persecution; the Dutch and French focused mainly on trade with limited territorial ambitions. The British were unique in systematically transforming India's political, economic, educational, and legal structures to serve imperial interests, gradually expanding from a trading company into the rulers of the entire Subcontinent.

Q4 "Indians funded their own subjugation." What does this mean in the context of British infrastructure projects in India like the railway and telegraph networks?

SOLUTION

The phrase 'Indians funded their own subjugation' means that the costs of British colonial rule in India — including infrastructure, military, and administration — were paid not by Britain but by Indian taxpayers themselves.

The railway network is the clearest example. Although railways are often cited as a benefit the British brought to India, the construction was paid for by Indian tax revenue, not by Britain. Moreover, the railway routes were designed primarily to move raw materials from the Indian interior to ports for export to Britain, and to distribute British manufactured goods throughout India — serving colonial economic interests rather than the needs of ordinary Indians. Railways also served a military purpose: to move troops quickly to suppress distant rebellions.

The telegraph network was similarly paid for by Indian taxes and served British administrative and military interests first.

Beyond infrastructure, the colonial administrative apparatus itself — the salaries of British officials, military installations, and even the wars fought by Britain — were all financed by Indian taxation. As the chapter states: 'In short, Indians funded their own subjugation.'

Answer: Railways and the telegraph were built using Indian tax revenue, not British funds. These networks were designed mainly to export Indian raw materials, import British goods, and move colonial armies — serving British interests. Indians thus paid for the infrastructure that facilitated their own economic exploitation and military subjugation.

Q5 What does the phrase 'divide and rule' mean? Give examples of how this was used by the British in India.

SOLUTION

'Divide and rule' refers to the strategy of deliberately exploiting or creating divisions within a population — between groups, communities, or rulers — so that the coloniser can maintain control more easily by preventing unified resistance.

The chapter gives several examples of this policy in India:

First, the Battle of Plassey (1757) exemplifies the approach: Robert Clive identified disgruntled elements within Nawab Siraj-ud-daulah's court and conspired with Mir Jafar, the Nawab's own military commander, promising to make him Nawab in return for his betrayal. Mir Jafar's forces stood aside during the battle, ensuring a British victory despite their smaller number.

Second, the British systematically played on rivalries between regional rulers or succession disputes within ruling houses to insert themselves as power brokers rather than being seen as foreign invaders. By offering military support to some rulers against their rivals, they gained political footholds.

Third, the British identified and often encouraged tensions between religious communities — for instance, exploiting divisions between Hindus and Muslims — to prevent unified resistance to colonial rule.

Fourth, the subsidiary alliance system trapped Indian rulers individually: once a ruler accepted a British Resident and became financially dependent on the arrangement, exiting it was virtually impossible, preventing collective Indian action against colonial rule.

Answer: 'Divide and rule' means exploiting existing divisions — or creating new ones — to prevent the colonised people from uniting against the coloniser. The British used it by conspiring with Mir Jafar against Nawab Siraj-ud-daulah at Plassey, playing regional rulers against each other, encouraging tensions between Hindu and Muslim communities, and trapping individual rulers in subsidiary alliances.