



SOCIO-POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC SCENARIO OF THE VICTORIAN AGE

RATNA BISWAS

Assistant Teacher

Email: rb423477@gmail.com



Abstract

This article attempts to deal with the socio-political and economic conditions of the Victorian society. In this regard a few discussions on different Reform Bills, Industrial Revolution, The Great Exhibition, Multiple acts like Factory act, mines and collieries act, the new poor law, the sanitary act, scientific discoveries all are portrayed with great care

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INTRODUCTION

The Victorian age is an era of peace and prosperity. This age is named after the name of queen Victoria. She ruled from 1837 to 1901. On 20th June 1837 when she was eighteen years old, she became the queen of England. Assuming that responsible office at so tender an age queen Victoria became more popular than any other British monarch and lived long enough to be affectionately called Grand - mamma. In the reign of her period, she got much assistance first by her handsome husband prince Albert and afterwards by able and sagacious prime minister like Robert Peel, Palmerstone Gladstone and Disraeli. She ruled for sixty years witnessing the introduction of the penny post, the telegraph, the telephone and the extension of Franchise to more and more sections of people. she had a great affection. All the three jubilees of her coronation were celebrated with spontaneous enthusiasm in all parts of the Empire. Throughout her reign, she maintained a sense of dignity and decorum that restored the average person's high opinion of the monarchy after a series of horrible, ineffective leaders. In fact, the number of British colonies was extended more in the reign of queen

Victoria. Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Singapore, South Africa, and India all these countries were the colonies of the British. This great queen died at the ripe old age of eighty - three, on 22nd January 1901.

AGE OF DEMOCRACY: Victorian age is an age of Democracy. Major democratic movements in Britain during queen Victoria's reign were directed towards expanding the voting population parliamentary elections.

REFORM BILL 1832: The first Reform Bill was passed 5 years before queen Victoria came to the throne of England. There were several reasons for the passing of the First Reform Bill in 1832. The most important was that the principle of distribution of seats in parliament was found to be defective. According to the age long arrangement each borough and county was allowed to send two representatives to parliament. But due to the Industrial Revolutions these boroughs were thinly populated as the people migrated to the industrial towns, seeking employment. Still those Boroughs continued to send the same number of representatives to parliament. At the same time the big industrial towns did not have any representation to the parliament of

England. The qualification for a person to have the right of vote was not just. The custom in the earlier centuries was that any free- holder, having an income of forty shillings a year, could vote at parliamentary elections. In the early part of the 19th century such a man was not wealthy and yet he continued to enjoy the same right. At the same time big tenant farmers holding land for long leases did not have any right of vote at all. This meaningless practice caused a lot of discontent among people. Unemployment in the country was a big problem. This caused a lot of suffering to poor people. It was felt that the only remedy for such a sorry state of affairs was more reasonable representation of people in parliament. So, there was widespread agitation in the country for parliamentary reform. In 1831, in the time of William IV prime- minister Earl Grey introduced a Reform Bill in parliament. After three times reading in the House of commons The Bill was sent to the House of Lords for its Approval. The Lords opposed it and on that account Earl Grey resigned. This led to the unpopularity of the Lords. The king then asked the duke of wellington to be prime minister, but the strange thing was that the duke was not able to get people to join his ministry. According to the Duke's advice Grey was recalled to form a ministry. once again Grey introduced the Reform Bill. The king, who was in favor of the Reform Bill, saw to it that about a hundred refractory Lords absented themselves from the House and the Bill was passed on 7th June 1832. The followings were the provisions of this epoch-making Reform Bill. Fifty -six rotten boroughs having a population of less than two thousand were deprived of representation in Parliament. Thirty - two boroughs having less than 4000 people were given only one seat each. Sixty-five seats were added to English counties, eight seats to Scottish counties and five seats to Irish counties. The franchise was also extended to all the householders in towns who paid ten pounds annual rent and in the counties to all who held a forty-shilling freehold or were ten - pound copy- hoed or fifty- pound lease- holders. The newly constituted House of Commons consisted of 658 members. According to this act the king and the lords lost much of their power but the middle classes got great authority. As the property qualification for franchise

was lowered, the number of voters became much larger. When it was announced that the Reform Bill had become law, the bells were ring and bonfires were burned everywhere as if a great victory had been won for the people. A new party called the Chartists arose and their activities were known as the Chartist Movement (1838). They demanded votes for all men, equal electoral districts abolition of the requirement that members of Parliament be property owners, payment for MPs, annual general elections and the secret ballot. This movement became important for working class agitators for social reform. Again in 1867 the second Reform Bill extended right to vote to all settled male tenants and 1884 Reform Bill (which gave working men in rural England the same rights as those in the boroughs) achieved further democratization of British politics and by the end of the 19th century universal male suffrage became almost a reality. However, women were still deprived of the right to vote.

ECONOMIC PROSPERITY

(1) INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTION: One of the most significant incidents in the reign of queen Victoria was the happening of the Industrial Revolution. It is known to us that the Victorian period was an era of unprecedented prosperity and it was due to the rapid industrialization of England. Mechanical devices were much developed and productivity could be increased almost to an incredible range by the application of machines. Moreover, there was a revolution in the commercial enterprise with the immense expansion of the available markets. England, in fact, flourished in trade and industries, and the benefits of the industrial revolution were well reaped by the Englishmen of the time. The Industrial Revolution was an off-shot of the ' Steam- Engine' had a tremendous impact and changed the very pattern of the productive process. Scientific activities, demonstrating the intellectual development of the age, were extensive and persistent.

Industrialization was a great blessing for England but it gave birth to a number of social problems. It created, on the one hand a rich privileged class of capitalists and on the other hand a huge ill- fed, ill-

housed and ill- clothed laborers. Due to the enhancement of industries national wealth increased but it was not equally distributed among all the section of people.

Material prosperity made people spiritually blind. The evils of industrialization are as follows -

- a) The miserable existence of the poor, the hellish condition of their dwelling- houses.
- b) Exploitation of child- labour
- c) squalid state of London slums above all
- d) The spiritual bankruptcy of the people.

(2) GREAT EXHIBITION:

In the second phase of the Victorian period ' the great exhibition ' took place in the year 1851.It was the first international exhibition of manufactured products. This great exhibition was conducted in the crystal place, a huge iron structure covered by nine hundred thousand square feet of glass. In that one spot people were able to see artistic works and raw materials gathered from every corner of the empire and the world. This exhibition exhibited hydraulic presses, locomotives, machine tools, power looms, power reapers, and steamboat engines. It was estimated that about six million people came to visit this exhibition which lasted for nine months.

SOCIAL CONDITION

The rapidly growing population which was concentrated in London, Liverpool and Glasgow and other towns lived in circumstances of physical and moral wretchedness. The rookeries of London and Westminster were dens of wretchedness and a large fraction of the population lived in crowded cellars. The lack of sanitation was scandalous; water supply was costly and inadequate and often contaminated, there were no proper means for the disposal of sewage and refuse, and there were foul graveyards near the houses of workers. The efforts of social workers to improve sanitation were obstructed by undertakers, private water companies and dustmen. The result was the spread of cholera in 1831, 1848 and 1853-54. Statistic research exposed conditions in the slums of London and other great cities. Towards the end of the century great strides were made in municipal reform, and volunteer

settlements such as Toynbee Hall sprang up in various localities. Newspapers like Daily Mail exerted a powerful influence in arousing public opinion against these conditions.

MULTIPLE ACTS - To give people their proper rights so many Reform acts were introduced in the reign of Queen Victoria -

(1) **The factory Act of 1833:** on the social front, the factory act of 1833 was a major accomplishment for the proper rights of child workers under this Act, a maximum working week of 48 hours was set for children aged 9 to 13, limited to eight hours a day and for children between 13 to 18 was limited to 12 hours daily. Children under 13 received elementary schooling for two hours each day.

(2) **The new poor Law, 1834:** The new poor law was enacted in the year 1834.It joined together about six parishes into a union for the administration of the measures to deal with the poor under the national leadership of the poor law commissioners. The poor law extended the system of workhouses to the whole country. Full time salaried civil servants were employed in each work house. The new poor law was meant to help, not the deserving unfortunate who might be in temporary difficulty owing to illness or unemployment, but to give food and shelter in the workhouse to the absolutely destitute

(3) **The 1842 mines and collieries :** The 1842 mines and collieries Act banned all women and children under 10 from working underground. Further acts were introduced following this in 1847,1853,1867,1874,1878 and 1891 which took more steps to alleviate the condition of the working class.

(4) **The sanitary Act of 1866:** The sanitary Act of 1866, compelled local conditions and remove health hazards.

(5) **1871- Trade Union Act** -This act was made for the protection of the rights of the labourers to organize to protect their rights.

(6) **1876 Education Act** was also passed, which made school attendance compulsory for those up to the age of 10.

Development of Transport: The Victorian period witnessed the tremendous progress in the means of transport and communication. The followings are the important means of communication during the Victorian period.

(a) Railway: The most important means of transport in the Victorian period was the railway. The interval of thirty - five years between the first two Reform Bills was the Railway age. In this period great improvements took place in the field of this transport. Fast moving engines were invented and better compartments and other facilities were provided. In 1843 there were about 2000 miles of railway in Great Britain but the coverage rose to 5,000 in another very short period of five years. In 1860 the mileage was just over 10,000 miles, but in 1890 it was nearly 20,000 miles. Meanwhile the government also took various measures to ensure efficient administration of the department. In 1873 the Board of Trade was attached a Railway commission which had power to fix the rates for the carriage of goods and merchandise. In subsequent years other effective steps also have been taken.

(b) Shipping: This age also saw the development of English shipping. Iron instead of wood was used for the making of ships and steam replaced sails. As early as 1847, the English steamships were few and small, but in the 1850s and 60s big ocean - going ships were made. In 1855 a third of the world's sea- going ships were on the British Register.

(c) Penny post: Another outstanding development in the means of communication was the establishment of the penny post in 1840. It was the tireless effort of Sir Rowland Hill. He was originally a teacher by profession. His proposals were based on the following: a lower rate of postage would increase the revenue of the state by increasing the volume of mail; all postage rates should be the same without regard to distance, and all mail should be prepaid. In connection with the last principle, he suggested a device which was subsequently known as the postage stamp. In putting his program into effect, he had to face a lot of opposition from the indifferent statesmen and uninformed civil servants. But it enabled the poor for

the first time in the history of mankind to communicate with their loved ones from whom they were separated. Gradually this postal system proved to be a success in England.

(d) Electric Telegraph: Another noteworthy means of communication in the reign of queen Victoria was the inauguration of the electric telegraph which was based on the invention of Samuel Morse.

(e) Telephone: The telephone, the most popular and easiest means of communication was invented by Alexander Graham Bell. He was an American. when he visited England, he had demonstrated his invention before queen Victoria partly because of the patronage given by her, the first telephone exchange was opened in London in 1879 with seven or eight subscribers. Several telephone companies were organised in Great Britain in the course of the next few years. As the potentialities of telephone communication began to be appreciated the government gradually took over the service. Today it is one of the easiest means of communication.

CONCLUSION

From the above discussion it is very clear to us that Victorian period was an age of peace and prosperity. An unprecedented development has been seen in the reign of queen Victoria in social, economic, political and science and technological fields. British colonies were extended much in this period. Another noteworthy incident was the industrial Revolution which gave birth the prosperity of the economic sphere of the Victorian age. In one word this era brought peace, prosperity, democracy and progress to the British people for the first time.

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