

Reforms of Lord William Bentinck

The official British efforts at reforming Indian society of its abuses were on the whole very meagre and, therefore, bore little fruit. Their biggest achievement was the outlawing of the practice of *Sati* in 1829 when William Bentinck made it a crime to associate in any way with the burning of a widow on her Husband's funeral pyre. Earlier the British rulers had been apathetic and afraid of arousing the anger of the orthodox Indians. It was only after Rammohan Roy and other enlightened Indians and the missionaries agitated persistently for the abolition of this monstrous custom that the Government agreed to take this humanitarian step. Many Indian rulers in the past, including Akbar and Aurangzeb, the Peshwas, and Jai Singh of Jaipur, had made unsuccessful attempts to suppress this evil practice. In any case, Bentinck deserves praise for having acted resolutely in outlawing a practice which had taken a toll of 800 lives in Bengal alone between 1815 and 1818 and for refusing to bow before the opposition of the orthodox supporters of the practice of *Sati*.

Female infanticide or the practice of killing female children at the time of their birth had prevailed among some of the Rajput clans and other castes because of paucity of youngmen who died in large numbers in warfare and because of the difficulties of earning a livelihood in unfertile areas, and in parts of Western and Central India because of the prevalence of the evil custom of dowry in a virulent form. Regulations prohibiting infanticide had been passed in 1795 and 1802, but they were sternly enforced only by Bentinck and Hardinge. Hardinge also suppressed the practice of making human sacrifices that had prevailed among the primitive tribe of Gonds. In 1856 the Government of India passed an Act enabling Hindu widows to remarry.

The Government acted after Pandit Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar and other reformers had carried on a prolonged agitation in favour of the measure. The immediate effects of this Act were negligible.

All these official reforms touched no more than the fringes of the Indian social system and did not affect the life of the vast majority of the people. It was perhaps not possible for a foreign government to do more.