

The Imperial Attempt at Subversion of the Status of Polity, Economy and Religion in Colonial America and the Coming of the Revolution

Mrutyunjaya Mohanty, Ph.D.

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Aspects of American Colonial Life

The three important aspects of American colonial life and society which were threatened by the intervention of Great Britain and helped in precipitating the Revolution and consequently ushering in the independence for the thirteen American colonies were: polity, economy and religion.

The colonists were convinced about their sincerity and loyalty to Great Britain, but were also conscious of their own sense of an emerging American patriotism and nationalism. They were beginning to become aware of the corruption and moral degeneration of England and of their own moral stamina and optimism of future greatness. Just at such a point the British measures gradually made inroads into their political order, economic set-up and religious dispensation.

Focus of This Essay

This essay seeks to present the political, economic and religious status of the American colonies at the beginning of the Revolution, to state the interference of Great Britain into the political, economic and religious life of the American colonists through imposition of various measures and to record the reaction of the colonists to these measures that culminated in their independence from Great Britain.

Polity

The establishment and development of the colonies had generated a sense of self-sufficiency in their inhabitants. They had also made them aware of their self-importance. Warren wrote in 1775: "When the hardy adventurers justly expected that they and their descendants should peaceably have enjoyed the harvest of those fields which they had sown, and the fruit of those vineyards which they had planted; this country was then thought worthy

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the attention of the British ministry; and the only justifiable and only successful means of rendering the colonies serviceable to Britain were adopted” (9).

Miniatures of the British Government? Conflicting Views

With this consciousness, the colonists believed that their governments were miniatures of the British government whose variations from the original “doubtless in time will be rectified” (Douglass 215). But the view that the Imperial government held about the colonial legislatures was more akin to what Bernard wrote in 1764 than to what the colonists believed of their own assemblies. Bernard emphasized on the Parliament’s power to interfere in the matters of dependent governments and held that the existence of the colonial assemblies was justified only on the basis of “their domestic economy, and the support of their Governments” (cited in Greene *Colonies to Nation* 11). Bernard went on to write: “All external Legislatures must be subject to, and dependent on, the Imperial Legislature : otherwise there would be an Empire in an Empire” (cited in Greene *Colonies to Nation* 11).

Goal to Have a Uniform Political System – Defiance in the Offing

The Imperial government, from the last part of the seventeenth century, had been speculating about a uniform political system for all the colonies with its strict supervision over them. But it remained a distant ideal even during the first half of the eighteenth century. The colonial lower houses, as Jack P. Greene aptly argues in *The Quest for Power*, had gradually wielded de facto powers and privileges, nullifying oppositions from London officials and governors and transforming themselves into miniature Houses of Commons. Friction began to appear when the Imperial government, in the 1760’s, made attempts to upset this arrangement.

Suspending States for Non-compliance

In retaliation to the New York Assembly’s defiance to fully comply with the billeting requirements as set down in the Quartering Act of May 15, 1765, Parliament, on July 2, 1767, passed the New York Suspending Act, a part of the Townshend Acts, which instructed the Governor to veto New York Assembly’s every act until it fully complied with the Quartering Act. This was a direct challenge to the legislative rights of the New York Assembly. This action accelerated the apprehension of the colonists that Parliament, to achieve its objectives, could go to any point, even to the point of destroying their legislative assemblies. The

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Imperial government, again acting with vengeance, this time against the Massachusetts Assembly for its Circular Letter of February 11, 1768 which spurred official resistance against the Townshend Acts, gave orders to Governor Bernard to dissolve the Assembly and this was duly executed.

Defiance of Massachusetts and Other States

Though, in case of New York, the ministry decided to drop the matter and not to force for complying with the Quartering Act; and in case of Boston, allowed the Massachusetts Assembly to summon without making any reference to its Circular Letter which was a consequence of North's conciliatory gestures in March 1770, it nevertheless indicated the direction of imperial thought on American polity. Four years later, in 1774, with the passage of the Coercive Acts, the entire province of Massachusetts was permanently deprived of all its coveted democratic rights by the British government.

The Virginia House of Burgesses was likewise dissolved following its resolutions on May 16, 1769 in answer to Parliament's resolve of the previous February which asserted the sole power of the Burgesses to tax the people of Virginia and censured Parliament's contemplation of bringing American patriots to Britain for trial. On December 8, 1769 the South Carolina Commons House of Assembly directed the treasurer to give £1, 500 sterling (£10, 500 South Carolina Currency) to a society for the purpose of paying Wilkes' debts. With the Instruction of April 14, 1770 the Imperial government urged the South Carolina Commons House of Assembly to rescind the grant which was defied by them on September 4, 1770. When the ministry refused to withdraw the instruction, the South Carolina Commons stopped to proceed to any public business which continued till the Declaration of Independence in 1776.

Effort to Strengthen Imperial Control

But these actions, on the part of the British government, were not simply acts of retaliation and vengeance. They were chiefly intended to strengthen the imperial control over the colonies and to curtail the authority of lower houses of colonial assemblies. In case of South Carolina, for instance, its assembly had wielded great powers through the middle decades of the eighteenth century. Though, issuing money from colonial treasuries without the consent of the royal governors had long been prohibited by imperial regulations, the South Carolina Commons had assumed the right of bypassing the Governor and ordering

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money from the treasury on its own and no Governor had ever dared to complain against it and it received the notice of the Imperial government only when news about the grant to Wilkes came out in the London newspapers. The Imperial government and the colonial governors were not oblivious of the assumption and enlargement of powers by the colonial legislatures. The Circular Instruction of September 11, 1767 by the Imperial government gave a general instruction to the royal governors in the colonies not to give assent to any law whereby the lower houses made attempts to change their constitutions or compositions. Governor Hunter of New York, in 1711, informed Bolingbroke, the then Secretary of State that the New York Assembly had already claimed the privileges of a House of Commons, and if the New York Council would successfully claim the rights and privileges of House of Peers, the colony would claim equal powers with and independent of the British Parliament.

Continuing Assaults on Colonial Assemblies

The Imperial government also made other assaults on colonial assemblies and attempted to subvert the colonial polity. Empowered with royal instructions, Hutchinson ignored the repeated protest of the House of Representatives and the Council and removed the place of meeting of the General Court from Boston to Cambridge in 1770 and 1771 with a view to minimize the influence of the Boston patriots on the House and the Council. The transfer of provision of salary to Governor and Judges of the Superior Court of Massachusetts from the Assembly to the King in June 1772 was another attempt to remove both the executive and the judiciary from any financial dependence upon the House of Representatives and to curtail the power of the colonial Assemblies. The Massachusetts Government Act of May 20, 1774, a part of the Coercive Acts, which transferred the power of appointing Governor's Council from the Assembly to the King and the privilege of choosing juries from the Town Meetings to the Sheriffs and forbade town-meetings except for the annual election of town officials had evidently been designed to weaken the political power of the colonies.

Conflicting Visions of the Colonists and of the Englishmen on the Concept of Empire

The contradictions, anomalies, and discrepancies that appeared in the political and constitutional set-up between Great Britain and the colonies in a seemingly and professedly single political and constitutional framework of the Empire owe their genesis to the contradictions, anomalies, and discrepancies that existed between the conception of the colonists and of the Englishmen about the status of the colonists and of the colonies in the

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Empire. The British viewpoint was succinctly described in *Boston Gazette and Country Journal* on May 10, 1756 which stated that a colonial Assembly could never be equal to British Parliament since “the former” had “not power to make laws repugnant or contrary to the laws of the latter”. But the colonists began to contend that they, upon leaving England, had totally disclaimed all “subordination to, and dependence upon, the two inferior estates of their mother country” (Hicks 23-24).

Economy and Its Effect on Growing Political Conflicts

The imperial government realized that the collection of duties from colonial trade and commerce was frustrating. It was also alarmed to notice the clandestine and contraband colonial trade with the enemy countries of England. There was wholesale violation of the Navigation Acts by the colonial merchants with the connivance of the very officers who were appointed for its due enforcement. A number of administrative reforms in the colonial customs service became imperative and they came into effect from October 4, 1763. In view of the proper collection of duties, prohibition of illicit trade, and due enforcement of the Navigation Acts, apart from various other measures, it was decided to appoint more officers where necessary and strict orders were given to all the concerned officers and to governors of all the colonies to cooperate in attaining the above cited objectives.

Control over Economy

Most of the provisions of the Sugar Act of April 5, 1764 too were concerned with further strengthening the enforcement of the customs service. Though this Act lowered the 6d-per-gallon duty on foreign molasses to 3d, it was going to be rigorously enforced in contrast to the preceding times when it had never been strictly done so. And most distressing to the colonists was the overhauling of the system of enforcement. The shippers of every cargo had to fill out an elaborate series of papers. In all cases coming under the Navigation Acts, the burden of proof was to be placed upon the accused. The customs officers were to be exempted from any prosecution if they could show a “probable cause” for a mistaken seizure and in such cases the defendant was to be deprived of any cost of the suit. The seized vessel and cargo, for violating the Sugar Act, were to be sold the proceeds of which were to be equally divided among the English treasury, the governor of the colony, and customs officers responsible for seizure. The act also put restrictions on a number of products to be imported

to and exported from America. And most significant of all, it was stated in the preamble that the raising of revenue from the colonies was the chief purpose of this Act.

The colonial reaction through writings to the reform of the Customs Service and to the Sugar Act through the legislatures, pamphlets, and newspaper articles became widespread. According to Oliver M. Dickerson, the Navigation system was satisfactory to the colonists prior to 1763 and the system was duly enforced without any significant objection from the colonists. Dickerson argues that the colonists viewed the imperial policy to be encouraging and protecting colonial trade, but the substitution of that policy by the system of trade taxation with the Sugar Act in 1764 had upset the balance and drained over £600, 000 from the colonies the bulk of which went from the important commercial towns who were leading the Revolution. He further argues that the colonists opposed the new measures because the Imperial government substituted the former policy of trade regulation by trade taxation.

Relaxed Enforcement and Acceptance of the System

Thomas C. Barrow has convincingly argued that the colonists opposed the philosophy and the operation of the Navigation system between 1660 and 1720, but accepted it between 1720 and 1760, not because it was not objectionable, but because it was loosely administered. Both Lawrence A. Harper and Curtis P. Nettels contend that the colonists' acceptance of the Navigation system before 1763 was not the result of their satisfaction with the system but of its lax enforcement.

Excessive Taxation - Duties

To bring in more revenue from the colonies, the Townshend Revenue Act became law on June 29, 1767 which imposed duties on items imported on glass, lead, paper, paints, and tea. And to strengthen the colonial customs enforcement another Act accompanied it known as the American Board of Customs Act. To ensure collection, the American customs service was reorganized. According to the new arrangement the Customs service which operated from London was transferred to Boston and was to be supervised by a separate Board of Customs Commissioners. Dickerson considers this to be the most fatal event in the imperial-colonial relationship. These Customs Commissioners received their salaries out of collections and began to shatter the colonial commerce, making a huge fortune by plundering large

amounts from colonial merchants through the employment of legal technicalities and unjust methods.

Growing Anger against the British Officers

A large number of writings reflected the aversion and indignation of the colonists toward these officers. Their appointment was considered unconstitutional and they were considered to be dangerous to life, property and liberty. The Boston Town Meeting declared : “These Officers are by their Commissions invested with powers altogether unconstitutional, and entirely destructive to that security which we have a right to enjoy; and to the last degree dangerous, not only to our property, but to our lives” (The Votes and Proceedings 15). A pamphlet entitled *Observations on Several Acts of Parliament* stated that some of “those wretches” were “persons of such infamous characters that the merchants” could not “possibly think their interest safe under their care” (15) and Silas Downer wrote in 1768 that these officers seemed “to be born with long claws, like eagles” and exacted “most exorbitant fees” (Hyneman and Lutz 103). The large number of appointments alarmed the people. Ebenezer Baldwin remarked: “An expensive Board of Commissioners for managing the revenue was constituted with the most extravagant powers ... They have power to constitute as many under officers as they please”(52). And the pamphlet entitled *Observations on Several Acts of Parliament* also wrote about the “appointment of an almost incredible number of inferior officers”(15). All these officers were, as William Gordon wrote, “lazy, proud, worthless pensioners and placemen”(11).

Religion and Politics of the Colonies – Anglican Domination

The Church of England, with patronage of the English State, and through the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts had really, by 1763, designed to establish episcopacy in the colonies. The aggressiveness of the Anglicans to secure a complete Episcopal establishment in the middle colonies and in New England and the long and often fierce debate on this issue between 1689 and 1760, as Carl Bridenbaugh convincingly argues, had already generated a disaffection among many American dissenters against England long before any of their political struggles against her began in 1763. The fear of the colonists was aggravated by the construction of large number of Anglican churches in the colonies. Jon Butler writes : “The Anglican campaign of 1680 – 1720 brought one hundred churches to the colonies, and the effort did not stop. Between 1760 and 1776, another one hundred Anglican

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churches were constructed in the colonies” (127). But as the advocates of episcopacy could not influence the British government to achieve their goal and failed to spearhead their movement, their activities did not create serious hostility among the dissenters.

Issue of Episcopacy

The episcopacy issue reached its peak between 1760 and 1765 with the energetic actions of Archbishop Thomas Secker to secure an Anglican episcopate in America. It led the American dissenters to link Grenville’s proposed taxation with the American bishopric and added to the fierce reaction to the Stamp Act in the northern colonies.

The anger and anxiety of the colonists on the episcopacy issue reached the climax in 1763 with the Mayhew-Apthorp controversy. News had reached the Presbyterian and Congregational leaders in the colonies about the meeting of Anglican leaders in New Jersey and New York and their plans to petition England for an American episcopate. Mayhew wrote in 1763 that the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts “long had a formal design to root out Presbyterianism, etc., and to establishing both episcopacy and bishops” (quoted in Bailyn *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* 96). He further wrote that the activities of the Society had “all the appearance of entering wedges ...carrying on the crusade, or spiritual siege of” their “churches, with the hope that they will one day submit to an Episcopal sovereign” (quoted in Bailyn *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* 96-97).

Tyranny Established and Supported by Bishops

Replying to Archbishop of Canterbury he stated that Bishops had commonly been instrumental in “establishing a tyranny over the bodies and souls of men” (quoted in Bailyn *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* 97). He expressed the view that their getting upperhand in the colonies would “exclude all but conformists from posts of honor and emolument” and all of them would “be taxed for the support of bishops and their underlings” (quoted in Tyler 134).

Collusion between Magistracy and Priesthood

The dangerous association of magistracy and priesthood, not only for John Adams but also for all eighteenth-century colonists in general, unleashed “temporal and spiritual tyranny” (Adams III. 451) which was “calamitous to human liberty” (Adams III. 450). John

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Adams wrote : “There seems to be a direct and formal design on foot, to enslave all America. This, however, must be done by degrees. The first step that is intended, seems to be an entire subversion of the whole system of our fathers, by the introduction of the canon and feudal law into America” (Adams, C.F. III. 464). And Mayhew voiced the general colonial sentiment during the Stamp Act crisis when he wrote : “the stamping and episcopizing [of] our colonies were ... only different branches of the same plan of power” (Bradford 372).

Demand for an Independent American Episcopate

The issue of the American episcopate continued to stay alive during the course of the Revolution following the Stamp Act, but did no more agitate the minds of the colonists until the passage of the Quebec Act on June 22, 1774. This Act had rekindled the issue by establishing in the conquered Canadian province of Quebec (which was under military rule since 1763) a civil government without a representative assembly and with special privileges for the Catholic Church. This official establishment of Catholicism in French Canada shocked the Calvinists who did not see much difference between the Church of Rome and the Church of England.

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Mrutyunjaya Mohanty, Ph.D.
Reader in English
Ravenshaw University
Cuttack-753003

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mrutyunja@gmail.com